

Voices

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Part 1 -- Eyes

The girl's eyes were hurt, haunted, the color of faded blue-jeans and staring wide out at him from under a mop of dirty hair that might have been blonde when clean. She was sitting on a milk carton next to the alley by the A&P. "Please," She said. "Please, do you have any change?"

This was New York, and in New York, begging for change is an art form that generally requires a lot more effort than a simple request, but those eyes stopped him, and John Storm found himself asking "For what?"

He could have found out without asking, of course. The voices could have told him; they were everywhere, and he had only to pick the right one and listen to it. John had been tuning out the voices for as long as he could remember. They floated on the air like ghosts. Whispers and screams, moans and sighs. He only listened now when he had to, because it seemed rude somehow to know everything there was to know without ever having to ask.

The girl looked away from him and it seemed a shudder passed through her, some spasm, some momentary twinge, suppressed nearly as soon as it began, and she made a coughing noise that sounded like a snarl. Her hands made little fists and when she looked back up John noticed the lines under her eyes and realized she was older than he had thought, closer to his age than the teenager he had taken her for initially.

John was twenty-six. Tall, dark and handsome, with green eyes and short black hair, he had not been wanting for female affection since some time in his early school years. Now though, he had grown distant. The voices had done that to him, over a time. The voices, and thinking he was crazy. People withdraw, when they think they're crazy.

"I need a drink," the girl said. "It's dark and I want to sleep, but I can't sleep, because I need a drink. I can't sleep without it, or he'll come for me. I can't sleep without it."

At least she was honest. John had no idea who would be coming for the girl, or how a drink might keep him away, and he supposed it didn't really matter. He was going to give her the money anyway. You don't stop, in New York, if you're not going to give them the money.

"How much will buy you a drink?" He asked.

“Buck and a quarter will buy me something,” she said. “Please.”

He nodded, handed her a five, said. “Take it. Get your drink.”

“Thank you.”

John eyed the girl’s scrawny frame. “Don’t suppose I could con you into spending some of it on food?”

“Probably not.”

John stood there a moment longer, and when she looked up at him again there was anger in those blue eyes. “If giving me money means I have to let you stand there pitying me, you can have it back.”

John shook his head. “No, it doesn’t, and I’m not. I’m trying to figure out whether I should ask you who’s going to come for you.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Okay. Take it easy, blue-eyes.” John walked. This was New York, and in New York when you’re not wanted, you move on. He didn’t care about the five, didn’t care that the girl got pissed, didn’t care much about anything, except those haunted blue eyes. Those had interested him, and now John found it impossible not to listen to the voices. He wanted to know, and after a minute, he did. Not all of it, no, but enough to understand the eyes.

He stopped in his tracks, ignoring the obscenities this earned him from the people behind him, spun, and moved back toward the girl. She saw him coming and for a moment John thought she might bolt, but she held her ground as he approached.

This time John hunkered down so he could look directly into those eyes. She met his glance for only a moment before looking away.

“Tell me something,” he said.

“What?” She wouldn’t look at him.

“Which part is it that makes you look like that? Is it when the man that you dream about does whatever it is that he does to you? Or is it when you kill him for it?”

* * *

John sipped coffee and looked across the table at the girl with the blue eyes. The voices whispered around him, but John wasn't listening. He was only interested, right now, in the person sitting before him. She had flinched when he described her dreams to her, flinched and gasped and turned to stare at him. She had told him he couldn't know about that, and John had said simply “But I do.”

Now they were at a diner, tiny and greasy and open all night, the sort of place where ten dollars would buy enough food to feed four people. The girl had been reluctant to come with him, but John's offer of a free meal in addition to the money for booze had been too much to pass up.

“When was the last time you ate?” He asked her.

“Real food? Not scraps?”

“Yes, a real meal.”

She was toying with a glass of water, nervous and agitated, not wanting to be there. Finally she looked up at him and said “Tuesday, I think.”

Tuesday. Today was Friday. John rolled his eyes. “Order whatever you want. Don't make yourself sick.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

The girl shot him an angry look. “Come on. I've never met you before, and now suddenly you know things about me, and are buying me food. What, are you a stalker? Am I supposed to come home with you and fuck you? Is that how the fantasy goes?”

John shook his head. “Maybe if you took a shower first...”

“Go to hell.”

“Listen, I don’t know why I’m doing this. Seriously. Does it matter? Is it so bad, being here?”

The girl bit her lip, looked around. “People are staring at me.”

“No. You just think they’re staring at you, because you think you’re crazy.” John didn’t need the voices to tell him that. He was intimately familiar with the feeling.

John was seventeen when he first learned the difference between multiple personality disorder, which all of the kids called “going schizo,” and true paranoid schizophrenia. A health teacher described the diseases to him, and their symptoms, and as she finished with the latter, John had simply turned and left her room. He had walked out of PS 283 in Brooklyn, New York, at twelve-thirty in the afternoon, and to this day could not remember the next four hours. All that’s there, when he thinks of that time, is the rushing noise of a million voices swarming him at once, whirring and buzzing in his mind.

“You don’t know what I think,” said the girl. She might have said more, but a pretty waitress with red hair stopped at their table and asked if they were ready to order. The waitress didn’t seem to care about the presence of the girl with the blue eyes, dirty or not. She seemed mostly interested in John.

“Steak and eggs, fried. Hash-browns, plain bagel with butter, please,” John said.

“Sure thing, cutey. What about your friend?”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger. No onions.” The girl with the blue eyes asked.

“Comin’ right up.” The waitress gave John a last look, and departed. The girl across from him rolled her eyes.

“Why doesn’t she just ask for your phone number?”

John shrugged. “She probably will. Why... are you jealous?”

“No. Jesus.”

“Then what difference does it make?”

“Whatever, man. If I eat this dinner with you will you leave me alone?”

“Maybe. You going to tell me your name?”

“It’s Jen, okay? Jennifer Wilkens. You going to report me to the police? I’m twenty-three. I’m not a kid.”

“You need to relax, Jennifer.”

“I need a drink.”

“I wonder about that.”

Jennifer was quiet for a few moments, staring out the window at the people on the street. When she turned back to him, John could read naked fear in her eyes. “How do you know about my dreams?”

* * *

John shrugged, sipped his coffee, leaned back against the padded bench seat. “Maybe I guessed about your dreams.”

“You didn’t guess. How much do you know?”

“Not much more than what I said.”

Jennifer slid into a leaning position against the window at the end of the booth, arms wrapped around herself, still staring at John. A shudder ran through her.

“Please,” she said. “You have to tell me how you know. You’re scaring me, and it’s important that you don’t do that.”

John cocked his head to one side. The voices were a rush in the background, but it seemed that one amongst the crowd was growing increasingly louder. “Why’s that?”

Her response was unexpected. “I can’t control it when I’m scared. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Can’t control what?” John raised his eyebrows. The voice was beyond dismissal now, crying nonsense words of pain and hate and rage. Jennifer’s eyes were wide, and he could see tears gathering there.

“I can’t tell you. Just... please answer me, please. You can’t know about that. No one knows about that.”

“If I promise to answer after dinner, will you calm down at least a little?”

“Just answer now!” There was a hysterical note to Jen’s voice he didn’t like at all. The voice in his head seemed to double in its intensity.

“It’s complicated.” John lowered his head, closed his eyes, put his fingers to his forehead. It was becoming difficult to keep track of the real world, so loud now was the voice. “Jen, you have to relax.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” There was raw panic in Jen’s voice now, and John realized the situation was about to erupt into something terrible. He forced the voice away and looked up at her.

“I hear voice, all the time,” He said. “Voices that other people can’t hear, and sometimes they tell me things. I suppose I’m crazy... but crazy or not, they’ve never been wrong.”

Jen said nothing, only stared. John continued.

“Right now a voice is screaming in my brain. I don’t know whose voice it is... maybe yours, maybe not; but it’s tied to you somehow. You’re upset, and the voice is screaming, and I feel like my head is going to explode. Now you know my secret, like I know yours. Okay?”

“You’re nuts...” Jen’s words were barely more than a whisper, but some of the panic was gone, replaced by an interest that seemed almost grudging. The voice in John’s head backed off a bit.

“No fucking shit,” John growled. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“So, what, I take a few deep breaths and your headache goes away?”

“Something like that, yes.”

Jen actually did so, leaning back against the glass again, contemplating this information for a time. John lay his head back, exhausted, glad that the voice was receding. Their waitress chose this time to bring them their food.

“Everything okay?” She asked, noticing John’s expression.

“Fine, thanks,” He said, not bothering to open his eyes.

“You sure?”

“He said he was fine,” Jen’s voice was dripping with distaste. The waitress seemed to take the hint. She handed them their plates and disappeared.

“Thank you,” John said after the woman had gone. He opened his eyes and looked at Jen. She gave him a small smile, and nodded.

“No problem, man. Crazy’s have to look out for each other.”

* * *

“You gonna eat that bagel?”

John looked over at the small plate sitting next to his main course, which was nearly finished, and shook his head. “No, I thought I wanted it, but I wasn’t that hungry.”

Jen had wolfed her burger and fries down at a rate just slow enough not to be alarming, clearly ravenous. John had eaten more deliberately, not really wanting the food but knowing he’d be starving later in the evening if he didn’t eat now. Jen had watched him, saying nothing.

Now she reached over, snagged the plate with a finger, and slid it to her side of the table. She grabbed a packet of grape jelly and began to spread it on the bagel. John made a face.

“Not a jelly fan?” Jen asked him.

“No.”

Jen shrugged. “I like it. You don’t get much sugar eating out of the trash.”

“Why do you live on the street, Jen?”

“Because that’s where drunk, crazy people live.” Jen’s voice was light, but she wouldn’t make eye contact with him.

“You’re not crazy.”

“Says the crazy guy. Thanks, that’s touching. If I’m not now, I will be soon. The booze doesn’t always chase away the dreams. They’re... awful.” Jen took a bite out of the bagel. “Mmmm. Sugar.”

“This man you see, Jen, was he real?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What happened?”

“Not interested in talking about it, thanks. He’s already come up enough today that I might as well save your money for tomorrow, because there’s fucking no way I’m not having the dream tonight.”

“Might help to talk about it.”

“Don’t, okay? Just... don’t.”

John put his hand against the back of his neck and rubbed the muscles there, trying to ease the last of the tension away. The voices had receded to their usual normal hum. He was tempted to find the information he wanted there, in those interweaving sounds, but decided that it would be unfair to Jen. He wanted her to tell him.

“Okay, let’s talk about something else, then.” He said.

Jen gave him a noncommittal look and continued eating her bagel.

“You said ‘I can’t control it when I’m scared,’ but you never told me what ‘it’ is. Something that can hurt me?”

Jen rolled her eyes. “Forget about that, too. Come on, man. You’re crazy, I’m crazy, we say crazy shit. I’m not making fun of your voices, am I?”

“I’m not making fun of anything, Jen. I’m honestly curious. If you want to ask about my voices, I’ll answer any questions you have.”

“Okay. Why aren’t you on medicine? You’re clearly doing okay for money, and you don’t seem like the type that objects to seeing a shrink. I’m sure they’ve got shit you can take that will fix your brain.”

John thought back to the day he learned the definition of schizophrenia. He thought about leaving health class, and about the blank space in his mind that follows. His memory of the day begins at four-thirty, sitting at a bus stop, smoking a cigarette and crying. He’s crying, and a woman sitting next to him asks him what’s wrong. He tells her that if she keeps cheating on her husband, she’ll eventually be caught. The woman gives him a look of hate and fear and anger and moves away. It’s a look, John thinks at the time, that people give to crazies.

It took several years to learn that it was also the look that people give him when he’s right.

“I didn’t want people to know I’m crazy. I thought they’d send me away somewhere, to live in an institution. I’ve been hearing the voices all my life and had learned how to deal with them. No one knew, and there was no reason to tell them. Now? It’s sort of useful.”

“So you just live with it?” Jen asked.

“Usually it’s not so bad. I don’t go out too much, but when I do there’s usually so much happening that it all sort of cancels out. It’s like white noise in the background. Stuff like... like tonight is pretty rare.”

“And the voices sometimes tell you things like they told you about me?”

John looked sheepish. “Well, I sort of listened specifically for that. I try not to, but I was curious about what you said, about the man coming for you.”

Jen looked at him, and John could read from her expression that she was trying to decide if this upset her or not. He looked out the window and said “I stopped before I got any real details. I feel bad doing that. I mostly only use the voices to help with my job.”

“What do you do?”

“I sell electronics. Cell phones and computers and all that shit. The voices help me make sales, which helps my commission.”

“Sounds pretty sweet.”

“It pays the bills.”

Jen finished her bagel, leaned back, closed her eyes. “Best meal I’ve had in weeks, Storm. Thanks. Almost worth the nightmares you’re going to cause me.”

“You can call me John.”

“Whatever. I hope this has been fun for you. I have no idea what you were hoping to accomplish.”

John felt frustration rising in him. “I don’t know what I was trying to accomplish either, I just... I feel like...”

Jen opened one eye and watched as John struggled to find the words. Finally she opened the other, leaned forward with her elbows on the table, and her chin on her palms, and asked “You feel like what?”

“It’s your eyes,” John said at last. “When I saw them, I felt like I needed to know you. Like it was important that I know you, for some reason.”

* * *

They were back at the alley by the A&P, and John felt sure that something had gone wrong.

“It’s not supposed to be like this,” He said, frowning. “You’re not supposed to leave.”

“That’s stalker-talk, hon,” Jen said. “It is like this, and I’m leaving.”

“Where will you go?”

“Tonight? It’s warm, so maybe the park. Or I might go down in the old subways and find someplace to curl up.”

“Is that safe? I mean, aren’t you afraid of getting beaten, or mugged, or raped, or something?”

Jen gave him a grin that reminded him of pictures he’d seen of snarling wolves. “I can take care of myself,” she said.

“But what if you...”

Jen ran a hand through her matted hair, and when she sighed, the sound was old and grey, a sound beyond her years. “Look, John, I appreciate the meal and the money and the stories about voices, but I don’t know what you want from me. I’m not going home with you, whether you want to sleep with me or not. I have no idea what you’re trying to accomplish here, but I’m tired. I want to get the nightmares over with so I can try to get at least a few hours of sleep.”

“This is going to kill you, Jen. I saw it in your eyes, earlier. You’re better now, because you’ve had some food maybe, but I can still see it there. You’re playing tough, but it’s eating you up.”

Jen shrugged. “Then I die. That might be for the best.”

“Will you...”

“No. I’m walking away now, John. Thank you again for dinner.” She began to move into the alley, fading from view as darkness engulfed her.

John made a sound of frustration. “What if I figure out why I’m supposed to know you. How will I find you again?” he called.

“Why not ask your voices?” her tone was sarcastic, but there was sympathy there, too.

“It doesn’t work like that,” John said, but it was too late. She was gone.

John looked up at the sky, down at the concrete, then ahead down the streets of Manhattan, sparsely populated now. It was almost two in the morning. He was supposed to be up in six hours to work, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to move. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. He had missed something.

Finally, with a grimace, John forced his feet to start walking. If something had passed him by, then so be it. It seemed there was little he could do about it

now. He moved in the direction of his apartment, thinking about Jen, ignoring the humming of a thousand whispering voices.

He didn't look back, and so he didn't see her. From the alley behind him, peering around the corner of the brick building, the girl with the blue eyes watched him go.

* * *

Part 2 -- Whispers in the Dark

Four in the morning and he couldn't sleep. John sat, sitting on his fire escape, smoking Camels and listening to random voices and the things they spoke of.

Above him somewhere a woman was receiving exquisite pleasure through the ministrations of a lover. Her voice came to John as a series of sighs and moans.

Below him somewhere, a man was tormented by dreams of the death of his child. His voice came to John as a litany of wailed curses.

Near him somewhere, a young boy slept, images of his birthday celebration running through his dreams. Cake and ice cream, friends, presents.

All around him, voices everywhere, so familiar now that John suspected he would feel naked without them. Some spoke nonsense in tongues he didn't understand, others spoke no words at all. None of them gave him the answers he was looking for. None of them told him what he had missed, or how he had missed it. None of them could explain why the look in her eyes had so affected him.

Blue eyes like old jeans, like the sky after a storm, like mist rising off a lake in the pale time before dawn. Haunted eyes, frightened eyes, eyes which seemed to plead for help. John wanted to help. For the first time in years, he found himself caring about someone, worrying about someone, thinking about someone. Knowing he was crazy, he'd stopped bothering to connect with people.

Now there was a connection again, forged by those blue eyes and by the shared knowledge between the two of them that, yes, they were crazy, or on the way there. John liked that connection, and he believed that there was some way he could have kept it alive.

And somehow he had missed it.

John pitched his cigarette butt over the edge and watched it fall, sparking off the building across the alley. "Okay," he said. "Fuck it. Sleep."

He was halfway back into his room when the screams started. John knew instinctively, as he knew with all his voices, that these were not sounds that

anyone else could hear. This was no different from any of the many screams he heard each day, in that respect. What was different was the voice itself; it was raw and immediate and visceral, not the type of thing he normally heard, which was more like the reflect sound of an echo. Perhaps it was their connection, perhaps it was a fluke, but John understood that he was hearing the sound in real time.

Somewhere in Manhattan, Jennifer Wilkens was screaming.

* * *

Of all the places he expected to be at four-thirty on a Tuesday morning, walking into a dark subway tunnel marked “No Trespassing” might well have been the last place John would ever have considered.

The screams had continued in his mind for some time, growing in frequency and intensity, and it had taken little time to make his decision. She was suffering, somewhere, and he wanted to help. He didn’t know what he could do, but listening to those screams without doing something about them seemed impossible. John had thrown on a coat and some shoes and bolted from his apartment and into the streets, moving on instinct, following the voice in his head.

The voice had led him here, before the screams had stopped.

In a way, as bad as they were, the screams had at least assured him that she was still alive. Now, John felt cold and frightened, wondering what if anything the abrupt cessation of the noise in his head meant. He thought of Jen being murdered and shuddered. ‘I can take care of myself,’ she had said, and surely this was true, but this was New York, and New York can be very ugly.

John followed the railing for a long way, perhaps a half of a mile, before he reached what seemed to be an entrance to a disused portion of the subway system. *Here*, his mind told him, and so he turned and went. At first the Zippo lighter he carried his only source of light, but after a few turns in the tunnel, it was no longer necessary. Up ahead there was a fire, and it cast a flickering orange glow on its surroundings.

“Choo doon down here whiteboy?” Asked a voice near his ear, and John flinched back, then turned to face the speaker.

“Looking for a friend,” he said.

The man before him was older, perhaps late fifties, wrapped in a blanket and stinking of bourbon. His grey hair poked out from his head in wild puffs and clusters. The voices swirled around him the way loose snow sometimes does in the winter, billowing on the wind. He looked up and gave John a toothless grin. "No frens round here, boy. Juss people who share a fire."

"Her name is Jen. She has blue eyes. Have you seen her?"

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Doan matter to me none, proolly ain't giving you no help either way. How do I know she wants to be found?"

"She may be in trouble. I'm trying to help her."

The old man gave a wheezing cackle. "Boy if she down here, you too late. Goan now, git up out of here."

"Not until I find her." John started toward the fire. The old man grabbed his arm.

"Hold up now. Can't just walk into the circle with no warning. Motherfuckers knife a man for that shit. They doan know you. Hold up."

John paused. The man stood, slow and shaky. Weaving, he made his way toward the circle.

"Got an outsider here. Outsider. Someone from topside." He called.

"Quitcher shouting, ass," said a voice. "People are trying to sleep."

"Ah, yo momma's tits, Milligan. Where's the blonde girl? Says he's looking for her."

"She fucked off two hours ago. Further back. Said she wanted to be alone. Tell loverboy he should go home. That bitch'll end up sticking him, like she did Pete."

"Pete try to stick her first, but not with no knife. Got him some stitches, he did. Nuttin more'n what he deserved," said the old man. He motioned to John, who came forward into the light. Milligan, the only other person in sight, looked up at him for a second, muttered something that John couldn't hear, and looked back at the fire.

“What?” John asked.

“Said I should cut your throat and take your jacket, loverboy. You want to fuck with that demented broad? She’s down in the old ladies’ room I bet. Still has a lock on the door. She sleeps there sometimes.”

“Thanks.”

“You want to thank me? Get the fuck up out my house, and take her with you.”

John shrugged. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Whatever. Jesus, Tyrone, you let anyone come up in here.”

Milligan and the old man began arguing with each other. John left them and followed the edge of the subway path toward what once was a main concourse, roughly a hundred yards away. There were no voices, here, at least none he could hear. The sensation was new to John. In twenty-six years, he’d never been far enough away from other human beings for the voices to disappear completely. It set him on edge.

As he neared the bathrooms, the voices returned, just a few whispers, but enough to know that someone else was near. The sounds he was hearing were like muffled curses. Echoing sobs. John knocked on the women’s room door. The response was immediate.

“Go away!”

“Jen...”

“GO AWAY!” It was a shriek, raw and brutal and piercing. John could now hear real sobs from the other side of the door.

“Jen, it’s John. From the diner. I... I can’t go away. I won’t. Not until I’m sure you’re all right. I’m sorry.”

There was silence for a time, broken only by the occasional hitching breath. John leaned against the door, then slid to a sitting position. He waited for another five minutes, listening as her crying come to a slow halt.

“I don’t know if I can help you, Jen, but I know I have to try,” He said into the darkness, when it seemed she was done. “Will you talk to me?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing, Storm.” Jen sounded tired and old. The voices, so isolated here, were impossible to tune out completely. They spoke of old hate, old rage, old hurt.

John sighed. “Ain’t that the truth.”

There was another pause, a shuffling noise, and then the click of a deadbolt turning.

“Come in,” she said.

* * *

“You shouldn’t have come here,” Jen said. She was sitting on the long wooden counter that ran the length of the wall. Her legs kicked the air in what seemed as much nervous twitches as anything intentional. She was smoking a cigarette, and looking at the floor.

“But I did,” John said. She had locked the door behind him, after he entered, and he was leaning against it. The bathroom was dilapidated, but at least it didn’t smell. Jen had piled some old rags in a corner, and he assumed she used them as a bed. There was a path between them and the door. The rest of the floor was caked with dust and grime.

“How did you find me?” Jen asked him.

“I heard you screaming.”

“I don’t scream. What are you talking about?”

“Not out loud. I heard your voice in my head. I live five miles from here, and I heard you from that far. Jesus Christ, Jen, it was the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jen’s shoulders twitched as a shudder worked through her. She took a drag from her cigarette and looked up at John. “The dreams are bad,” she said.

John lit a cigarette of his own, said nothing.

“What do you want from me, Storm?” Jen asked him.

“Never to hear that screaming in my head again,” John replied without hesitation. “But that’s not really what this is about. This isn’t about me anymore Jen. It’s about you. How can I help you?”

Jen looked away. “You can’t. John, you could’ve been stabbed or some shit. This is so stupid. Now I’m going to have to take you back out.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you. Jen, you need help.”

“I need a drink,” Jen said. She looked back at John and there were tears in her big, blue eyes.

“You need to fucking talk about these dreams, Jen. You can’t keep them bottled up inside you. They’re getting worse, aren’t they?”

She nodded. Two tears escaped her eyes and traced their way down her cheeks, following the clear paths that had already been made there through the smudges by her earlier crying.

“What does he do to you, Jen?”

Her lip trembled, and when she spoke, it was with a hoarse, croaking voice that sounded like it must be painful. “It’s not just what he does to me. That’s just the start. What’s really driving me crazy isn’t what he does to me, what he *did* to me.” she said.

John waited for elaboration.

Her eyes were far away, brimming with horror and hate. Finally she said, “It’s what I did to him.”

Jen put her hands over her eyes and wept.

* * *

“Nice place.”

They were standing in the doorway to John's studio apartment. Jen was looking over his shoulder. John moved aside and let her in. The voices surrounded him again, now that he was so close to other people, and to John they felt like a warm blanket. He wondered if it should worry him that he'd grown so attached.

"Eh. It's basically a closet with a bathroom, but it's cheap," he said.

"It's fine, John. It's like a palace compared to what I've been living in the past few years."

John could see how that would be the case. He nodded. "You want to sleep on the couch or the bed?"

"I'm not going to sleep either way, so why don't you take the bed?"

"You sure?"

"Oh, yes. I'm positive."

John sat on the edge of his bed. Jen took a seat on the couch and looked at him.

"Wish you'd tell me about your dreams, Jen," he said. They had spent almost half an hour more in the bathroom. Jen had cried for part of it, and John had not tried to stop her. He thought maybe it might help her. Finally it had passed, but she had refused to speak further of the dream.

Finally, John had invited her to his apartment. He didn't want to sleep with her. He didn't want to kill her. He just wanted to give her someplace decent to stay while he figured out why he needed to know her. Jen had reluctantly accepted.

"Maybe someday I'll tell you about them. Maybe I'll go completely crazy and not be able to stop talking about them." Jen rolled her eyes.

"You going to be here when I wake up?"

Jen gave him a sad, tired smile. "I wouldn't have come back here with you if I wasn't."

“You want to take a shower?”

“God, yes.”

“Go for it. There’s a new toothbrush in the right drawer. Wear whatever you can find in the closet. We’ll throw your clothes in the wash tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Jen stood up, opened the closet, began looking through John’s clothes. John picked up the phone, called into work, left a message on the answering machine saying he’d spent all night throwing up and was just finally getting to sleep. Jen laughed as he hung up.

“I’m going to sleep,” John said. “If you want to watch TV, go ahead. I’m so fucking dead, I’d sleep through world war three.”

“Why are you doing this for me, John?”

“I don’t know. I have to. If I could explain that, I would...”

“But you can’t,” Jen finished for him.

“Goodnight, Jen,” John said. He stood up, put his keys and wallet on the night stand, and pulled off his shirt. As he turned, Jen noticed a criss-crossing pattern of scars on one bicep, considered asking about them, and decided against it. John flopped down on the bed, still wearing his jeans, and shut his eyes. Within minutes, he was asleep.

Jen thought about robbing him blind, and then smiled at herself. No way. She couldn’t do that, not even after four years on the street. He’d asked if she would be around when he woke up, and she intended to be. She didn’t think he could help her, but she had to admit, it made her feel better, being near someone who had somehow managed to not let being nuts destroy his life.

She stood by the door to the bathroom for a moment, watching him sleep. Before turning to go take her shower, she said, “Goodnight, John.”

* * *

The sun woke him, glaring in through the half-closed blinds and striking his eyes. John stirred, opened one eye, looked at the clock on his bed stand. It was just past noon. The TV was on.

Why was the TV on?

John sat up, and at first he didn't recognize the girl with the golden hair sitting on his couch. Memories of the previous night began to flood his head, and John realized that this was Jen, when Jen was no longer covered with a layer of dirt and grime.

She was curled up on his couch, wearing one of his longer, button-down flannel shirts, bare legs pulled up beneath her, watching the television. Her hair reached halfway down her back, and hung about her head in loose curls. John found it hard not to stare. That she was gorgeous was bad enough, the bare legs -- bruised here and there but otherwise shapely -- were worse. Wearing his shirt like that just capped it off... he'd always liked it when girls did that. There was something inherently sexy about it.

Now would be a bad time to fall in love, he thought to himself.

"Morning," he said out loud. "Or... afternoon. Whatever."

Jen turned to look at him, and John was again struck by her eyes. In the sunlight, the faded blue seemed to grow vibrant and intense.

"Hi," she said. "Sleep well?"

John ran a hand through his hair and blinked a few times. "Yeah."

"Must be nice." There was no anger in her voice.

"We'll get you there, Jen."

She laughed, a small and cynical sound, and turned back to the television. "Sure."

"I'm going to throw your clothes in the wash and then take a shower." John sat up and pulled on his shirt.

“Okay. You have no pants that will fit me, but this shirt was big enough that it works as a nightgown. I found a pair of panties way in the back... hope they weren’t a souvenir. Or your ‘when no one’s watching’ pair.”

John rolled his eyes. “No. Neither. Someone left them here. I don’t remember her name.”

“Charming.”

“Crazy people don’t have long relationships,” John’s voice was dry. Jen laughed again.

“I guess that makes sense,” she said.

John grabbed his keys and wallet, pulled on his shoes, and picked up her clothes, trying not to think about when the last time they might have been washed was. He grabbed a menu and set it on the coffee table in front of her. “I’ll be right back. Here, order some Chinese food. This place delivers.”

“What do you want?”

“Cashew chicken.”

“Kay.” Jen picked up the phone and began dialing. John headed for the laundry room at the end of the hall.

* * *

“Do you think they really catch alley cats and eat them?” Jen asked between bites of lo mein.

John shrugged. “Sure, what the hell. It’s all meat. Put a little soy sauce on it, toss it with some vegetables... you’re good to go.”

Jen made a face. “That’s gross.”

“It’s only gross because of perception. If cows were fluffy and batted at little pieces of string and wandered around the house like pompous assholes the way cats do, no one would want to eat them either. If you batter little fluffy up, I bet she tastes fine.”

“You’re making it hard to eat.”

“So I should avoid the ‘cat-chew chicken’ pun I was moving toward?”

Jen laughed. “Yes, please.”

John smiled at her. “It’s good to hear you laugh. I like that a lot better than crying... or screaming.”

Jen shrugged, took another bit of her food, swallowed, changed the subject. “Can I get a bite of your cat-chew chicken?”

“Yeah, sure.”

They were sitting on the floor on either side of the coffee table. John had no real table, and ate most of his meals sitting in front of the television. Jen didn’t seem to mind. She leaned over, stabbed her fork into the tin of Chinese food, and took a bite. John tried not to look down her shirt -- his shirt -- and was at least somewhat successful.

“Yum. You have any grand visions while you were asleep about why it is you’re ‘supposed’ to know me?” Jen waved her hands in the air as if in control of mystic forces, but there was a smile on her face.

John shook his head. “Nope. I don’t even remember what I dreamt about.”

“Lucky you.” Jen leaned over again and snagged some more chicken. Before eating it, she looked up, her face inches from John’s. “Sorry, I should’ve asked first.”

“S’okay,” John said.

Jen paused, looking at him. “I really like your eyes,” She said.

“Thanks.” John liked hers, too. A lot. He was struck by the realization that he very much wanted to kiss her.

As if sensing this, Jen shifted her gaze away, gave him a small smile and a slight shake of the head. “Don’t,” she said.

“Okay, but no fair leaning in like that,” John replied.

Jen grinned, pulled back, ate her bite of chicken. "I suppose that's reasonable."

John wanted to ask why she had said 'don't.' Why she had stopped and looked at him like that if she hadn't felt that same connection. He knew she wouldn't answer, so instead he took his own forkful of chicken and said nothing.

"You sure you want me staying here, John? Things can't ever be... like that. I don't want to bother you any more than I already have."

"I'll survive, Jen. I'm more concerned about you than about me."

"Touching. So how long do I get to ride the free Chinese food gravy-train?"

"Long as it takes, I guess. If you're not going to sleep, though, that won't be very long."

"Oh, I'll sleep. I just need booze." Jen leaned back against the edge of the couch, stretching. She looked back at John and smiled.

John shook his head. "Uh-uh. I don't think that's a good idea."

Jen's smile disappeared. "Then we're going to have to part ways, Storm. I need it. I skipped last night and you saw what happened."

"No, I saw the end of it. Tonight I want to see the whole thing. I want to see if I can help."

"No way. Not going to happen. You think you want to see it, but you don't."

John rolled his eyes. "Look," he said, "You're in my brain now, Jen, and I don't know how to get you out. I have a vested interest, then, in figuring out how to help you. I can't listen to you scream in the middle of the night for the rest of my life."

"Tough shit. I'm not responsible for you being nuts, and I'm not putting up with the dreams just because you've got some kind of mental bond delusion happening."

“You mean the ‘delusion’ that allowed me to home in on you in the middle of an abandoned subway? That’s the ‘delusion’ you’re talking about, right?” John’s voice was laced with sarcasm.

Jen didn’t answer, just looked away, her lower lip jutting out in an expression of frustration.

“Right,” John continued. “No answer for that one, because it’s not a fucking delusion. Like I said... I may be crazy, but the voices are never wrong, and this voice -- your voice -- is really damn loud.”

“I’m not some kind of caged monkey for you to experiment on,” Jen said.

“I don’t want you to be. I’m asking you Jen, please, stay here with me for the night, and stay away from the booze. One night. You survived last night. You can survive tonight. How bad can it be?”

Jen laughed. There was no real humor in the sound. “Okay, Storm. You want to know how bad it can be? Fine. What the fuck, right? You’ll see.”

* * *

After agreeing to stay with him for another night, Jen’s mood was dark. They watched a movie in silence. By the end of it, she seemed to have relaxed a little. Confident that she wouldn’t run from the apartment while he was gone, John went and brought back her clothes, now clean. Jen changed into the jeans and t-shirt in the bathroom, emerging with her hair pulled back into a pony-tail. She sat back down on the couch next to John, put her feet up on the coffee table, and looked at him.

“Tell me about your voices,” she said.

John opened his hands, palms up, and said “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything. How do they work?”

John thought for a moment, trying to put it into words. Finally he said, “Sometimes I hear what seem to be direct, uh... transmissions. Like one time I was sitting next to a man on the subway and there was a voice just going ‘I’m going to kill that bitch’ over and over again.”

“Did he kill someone?” Jen asked.

John gestured toward the windows. “It’s a big city. Lots of people die. No idea if he killed her or not. I got off at my stop and his voice faded away. It’s a short-range kind of thing. Like say I wanted to find out where the president was going to dinner. I’d have to be within a couple hundred feet of him. I can’t just ask the voices for that information.”

“You talk with the voices?”

“No... not really. That’s just the term I use. It’s not so much asking them things as filtering. Like when I wanted to find out about you, I didn’t talk to any of them, I just sort of put the ones that weren’t about you on mute. I really don’t do that too much. It feels like eavesdropping.”

Jen tilted her head sideways, clearly interested, saying nothing. John continued.

“Basically most of the voices are like echoes. They’re scattered and weird, not always coherent. They tell stories, but they do it in bits and pieces. I’ve just learned how to piece them together. Like the woman above me, she’s really got a thing for guys going down on her, but I’ve never heard her voice say it like that. I just hear fragments, and eventually you hear enough that it sort of makes sense. Like jumbled word puzzles or whatever... you know how those just ‘click’ eventually?”

Jen nodded.

“There’s a click, like that, when I get it. Usually it’s pretty easy. Sometimes it’s not. It took me a few minutes just to get as much as I got from your voices, because they’re pretty uh... chaotic.”

“I imagine. So, look, have you ever considered that you’re maybe reading people’s minds?”

John nodded. “Yeah. Well, no. I mean... I’m not reading their minds, I don’t think, but I have considered that the voices are thoughts that are being broadcast. You see the difference? Reading minds would be more like looking up something in an encyclopedia. This is more like walking by a radio and catching whatever happens to be playing.”

“Have you ever *tried* to read a mind?” Jen asked.

“No, not really.”

She grinned, and shut her eyes. “What am I thinking of?”

“Oh, Christ. I don’t know.”

“Try!”

John shut his eyes as well, and concentrated. The other voices quickly filtered away and he was left with only Jen’s.

“You’re thinking about a doll you had in third grade, with a pink patchwork dress. This still isn’t reading minds, Jen.”

“It’s not?”

“No. You’re broadcasting, like the radio.”

“Well, shit... then try to pull something out of my head that I’m *not* thinking about.”

“I have no idea how to do that.”

“Try, dammit!” Jen’s earlier anger seemed to have been forgotten. There was laughter in her voice. “I’m going to keep thinking about the doll. You try and pull something else out of my head.”

John kept his eyes closed. “Okay.”

He concentrated, focusing on the voices surrounding Jen, trying to find a way to pull others from her than those she was broadcasting. At first there was nothing, and then John felt a moment of horrible vertigo, felt as if he were being pulled through a tube and yet sitting still at the same time, and a voice said “Timmy, please stop hiding my cigarettes,” and for the first time John found an image materializing in his mind’s eye that didn’t seem to be coming from his own brain. A young man with blonde hair and blue eyes, features like Jen’s, clearly a relative.

John opened his eyes and there was again that sense of vertigo, this time much worse, as he felt himself rush back into place. Jen was looking at him in anticipation, smiling, eager.

“Do you have a brother named Tim?” John asked.

Jen went white and her eyes grew wide. “Holy shit,” she said in a breathless whisper. “Holy shit, John, yes, and I totally wasn’t thinking about him. I... where are you going?”

Staggering toward the bathroom, John said “I have to throw up now.”

* * *

When the sound of vomiting was over, and she heard the toilet flush and the sink run, Jen got up and joined John in the bathroom. He was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, hands folded behind his neck, staring down at the floor. Jen leaned against the door frame.

“You okay?”

John didn’t move. “Yeah. It’s passed now. I’m not going to want any cat-chew chicken for a while though.”

“I’m sorry John.”

John looked up at her. “Why?”

“It’s my fault. I made you do whatever it was that made you sick.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m the one who did it, and besides, getting sick was worth the experiment. I pulled something out of your brain, Jen. That’s important. That’s really, really fucking important.”

It was Jen’s turn to ask why.

John looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and when his gaze met hers again, he was smiling. “Because it means maybe I’m not crazy after all.”

Jen nodded. "I gotta tell you, Storm, I don't think crazy people generally hold their shit together for as long as you seem to have. Between the whole finding me thing, and talking about Tim..."

"Yeah. Tim, who used to hide your cigarettes."

Jen's eyes lit up. "Yes! That fucker, he used to do it all the time, as if that was going to get me to quit. Jesus, John, that's amazing!"

"I'm going to want to try that again." John said. His voice was distant, as he pondered the sensations he had experienced. He wondered if he could get used to them, and avoid the unpleasant conclusion that had occurred this time.

"Sure, anytime. Just... let's do it on an empty stomach next time, okay?" Jen said. "I hate listening to people puke almost as much as I hate puking."

John nodded. "It's a deal. Empty stomach."

"What was it like, reading my mind?"

"Bizarre," John said. "Like moving and not moving. I heard a voice, your voice, and saw a face. I wasn't really in control, exactly, but it was something new. Something I haven't done before."

"Cool."

"Yeah, it was."

"You want to get out of the bathroom?" Jen asked, smiling. She held out her hands, and John took them, and let her pull him to his feet. They stood there for a minute, looking at each other.

"Gonna let go of my hands?" John asked after a moment. Jen did, and took a step back.

"I'm going to have to leave after tonight," she said. "I can't stay here. You're... bad for me."

"I am?"

"You are." Jen turned and headed for the other room. John followed her.

“Why am I bad for you?” he asked, flopping down on the couch. Jen sat down at the other end.

“You make me feel things I don’t want to feel. Things I need not to feel, because they can’t lead anywhere good.”

John looked frustrated. “Everything you say is a riddle.”

“You’ll understand tonight.”

“So you say.”

“Wait and see.” Jen was smiling, but her eyes were dark.

John waited, and eventually he saw.

* * *

Jen didn’t sleep easy, even before the nightmares. She lay in John’s bed, tossing, turning, moaning to herself. John sat on the couch and watched her, feeling a mixture of confusion and pity. Something awful had happened to this girl. He could guess what it was that the man in her dreams had done to her, and what she had done in retaliation. That much seemed obvious, without the help of the voices. It was the specifics, John thought, that might explain why she was slowly killing herself with booze.

Twice he got up and pulled the covers back over her, not so much for their warmth but out of a sense of propriety. Jen was again wearing one of his shirts as a nightgown, and it had long since ridden up above her waist. Jen’s plain white cotton panties were simultaneously sexy and innocent, and John felt wrong not keeping her covered up.

John sat, and waited, and after a few hours found himself nodding. He wondered if it was better to stay awake, and decided that, loud as Jen’s screaming had been the night before, it would certainly wake him if she had the dream this night. He closed his eyes and slept.

The screams came to him first in his dreams, and though her body was physically close, it seemed that Jen’s mind must have been far away. When the sounds started, they were distant, and it was not until they were nearing a fever

pitch that their volume grew great enough for John to recognize them for what they were, and begin pulling himself from the depths of sleep.

He was awake to see it happen, but unable to intercede in time to prevent it, if indeed it could have been prevented.

Jen shoved herself upright, shrieking some incoherency, eyes wide and staring, and behind him John heard a thudding, crashing noise. He turned toward the sound, feeling slow and stupid and still mostly asleep. What once had been a bookcase resting near his front door was now a pile of timber and paper.

“What the fuck?” John heard himself say.

Jen was now crying “No, no, no!” at the top of her lungs in rapid litany, her voice breaking, and John heard more crashes. He watched as Jen’s head swiveled here and there. Whatever thing her staring eyes focused on simply exploded. His alarm clock became a sparking pile of plastic and wire. His closet doors were punched inward, splintered and fragmented. The coffee table burst into pieces, spraying John with chunks of wood. He raised his hands instinctively, probably saving his eyes. He could feel the bits and pieces, moving at tremendous speed, slashing him through the fabric of his shirt.

“Jesus Christ!” John shouted. “Jen, stop! You have to stop!”

“I can’t stop!” she wailed in a frightened little girl’s voice unlike anything he had heard from her before. “I’m scared and I can’t stop!”

Things around the room were still exploding, and John realized that at any moment, one of those things might be him. Desperate and terrified, he did the only thing he could think of to do that wasn’t bolting out the door: he shut his eyes and concentrated, reaching out with his mind toward Jen.

Her breath hitched for a moment, and then resumed its panicky gasping. “John, what are you doing?” She cried.

“I have no fucking idea,” he snarled. He tried to will himself into the state he had been in earlier, and all of a sudden, with an almost-audible click, there came again that sense of vertigo. John fought against it this time, and tried to stay relaxed. He tried to project his calm outward, toward Jen.

“What is that? It feels good!” Jen’s voice was still loud and hysterical, but John thought it had maybe come down a notch.

“I’m trying to help you relax,” he said, keeping his eyes closed.

“Keep doing it! Don’t stop!” Jen pleaded.

There was more thudding, but this time it was from the other side of the wall. “Why don’t you save the sexual conquests for the weekend, Storm?” shouted a voice.

“Fuck you, Jawolski!” John shouted back. He felt himself losing his grip on Jen’s mind.

“John, please. I... don’t go. Please.”

“I’m right here, Jen. You have to relax. Can you relax for me? I’m not going anywhere. Take a few deep breaths.”

Jen did as she was told. “You’re leaving me,” she said.

“Only leaving your head. I can’t hold on anymore, Jen. I’m not good at this yet. I’m still right here, okay?”

John felt the awful vertigo again as the connection severed. His gut wrenched, but he clamped his jaws shut and fought against the need to vomit. After a time, it passed. He opened his eyes and looked around.

The apartment was trashed. Jen was sitting in his bed, hands over her face. John got up, took three unsteady steps around the pile of rubble that had once been his coffee table, and sat down next to her on the bed.

“That was unexpected,” he said.

“You fucking bastard!” Jen shouted, hitting him in the arm. John let her do it, not minding the blows, wanting her to vent her anger. “I told you to let me drink. I told you! Now look, I’ve destroyed your whole fucking apartment. Look what you made me do!”

After five or six punches, John grabbed her hand, pulled her against him, and wrapped his arms around her.

“Let me go. I hate you. I hate you!” Jen pushed against him, but John held her tight. After a moment, she stopped fighting, pressed her face into his chest, and began to sob.

* * *

They were still sitting on the bed. Jen had cried into his chest for several minutes, but eventually the tears had stopped. Now, John had let her sit back up, smoothed her hair away from her eyes, and smiled at her.

“You could’ve told me,” he said, and Jen’s face crumbled. John was sure that she would start weeping again, but after a few shaky breaths, she fought it off and asked for a cigarette instead. Then she looked up at him with those haunted blue eyes.

“I was thirteen the first time my uncle raped me,” Jen said.

She paused, trying to light a cigarette. Her hands were shaking too badly to do it, and eventually John took the lighter from her and held the flame to the tip. Jen inhaled, blew smoke out through her lips, stared at him, looking miserable.

“I thought it might be something like that,” John said, lighting his own cigarette.

“Do you want to hear about it?” Jen asked.

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in John’s voice. Even if he hadn’t been interested, which he was, he would have wanted her to tell it anyway. It was obvious that she needed to.

Jen sighed, and began.

“I lived with my Dad and my brother in Maryland, and he’d come to visit us sometimes, and he was always so nice to us. When he came to live with us, Timmy and I were so happy. He was so much fun. And for the first year or so, it was great. Until my... until my breasts really came in. That’s when the tension started.”

John nodded, said nothing, waited for Jen to go on.

“He came in one night while Dad and Tim were on a fishing trip, drunk, and he held me down and slid my nightgown up and raped me. I barely knew what the fuck he was doing... they’d only just taught us the mechanics in health class that year, you know? I just knew that it hurt a lot, and that I felt so ashamed after it was over.

“He used all the clichés... told me it had to be our secret, that Dad and Tim wouldn’t understand, that people would think I was a whore who got what she deserved if I ever told anyone. I felt so bad; I assumed he must be right. I promised not to tell, and he left.

“I waited until he was gone, and then I went in the bathroom and threw up. I turned on the water but I couldn’t... I didn’t want to be naked. I didn’t want to see myself. I waited until all the mirrors fogged up, and then I got undressed. There was a lot of blood. ”

John shook his head. He was trying to think of something to say, and coming up empty. Jen continued.

“Once I got the blood off, I sort of... that was the main thing. I *had* to get the blood off me right then. It was like it was burning me. Once that happened I kind of collapsed. I just lay down on the floor of the tub and cried for a long time. I don’t know how long.

“Eventually I got out of the shower and hid the clothes. I burned them, later. That night I just hid them, and then I sat on the little couch in my room all night and tried not to think about anything. After a while, the sun came up, and I went to school.”

“But that wasn’t it,” John said. It wasn’t a question.

Jen shook her head. “That was the beginning. It was almost a year before it happened again. I was fourteen by then, and had almost gotten past it, when he showed up again. This time he threatened to hurt me if I didn’t promise to keep it secret.”

John rested his head against his hand. “Christ,” he said.

“Eight months later, same deal. Six months later, I was fifteen, it happened again. Then five months. Then three. Then a long stint, about another eight, then twice in the span of three months. I remember every fucking one. I could tell you

the exact dates. After the second one I started taking birth control pills because I didn't want a baby. I told my doctor I needed them for PMS.

“By the end I was almost seventeen, drinking all the time, taking ecstasy just to stay happy enough that people would leave me alone. Sometimes I got so drunk I'd spend half the night puking. Tim knew I had a problem, but I wouldn't tell him why I drank. I never told anyone, ever, until now.”

She looked up at John with those haunted blue eyes. “You win, John. You get to know what no one else ever knew. Hope it's what you were looking for.”

* * *

“I'm sorry for what happened to you, Jen.” John wanted to take her hand, but wasn't sure how she would react. Jen seemed to sense his apprehension.

“I'm not going to bite you,” she said, her voice tired and hoarse. “Not going to blow you up, either.”

“How do you do that, Jen?” He asked.

She shrugged. “How do you read minds? Who fucking knows? I just do it. I've been able to do it since I was seventeen, when...”

She paused for a moment, and John said, “Oh, fuck.”

Jen nodded. “Yeah, exactly. I told you, it's not what he did to me. That was bad, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to put it behind me, but it's got nothing on what I did to him. He was on top of me again, pulling at my clothes again, and I was screaming. I'd never done that before, and wouldn't have this time, except for the pain. Whatever was happening that turned on this ability, it hurt more than anything else I've ever felt. I screamed, and screamed, and all of a sudden the pain went away and Uncle Jake looked like a doll flying through the air.”

Jen let out a harsh coughing noise that sounded like it wanted to be a sob. This time she lit her own cigarette.

“He splattered, when he hit the wall. There was nothing left of him really except mush. I turned every bone in his body into powder. I couldn't control it. I didn't mean to. He was dead before he hit the wall, had to have been. That's what the newspapers said. I read them in the bus station.”

“You took off that night?” John asked.

“As soon as I figured out what I’d done to him, yes. What else was there? Stay and try to explain how I’d turned my uncle into a piece of modern art? I left, and got on the bus, and came to New York. I took a job at first, and managed to find a small place to live, but then the dreams started, and I couldn’t hold down the job for much longer after that.”

“So you ended up on the street.”

“Yes. I’m a freak and a murderer, and now you know, and I guess I’ll go to jail. Maybe I’ll get lucky and they’ll just shoot me dead.”

“One thing at a time,” John said. “First off, I’m not going to run off and call the police. As far as I’m concerned, your uncle got what he deserved. That wasn’t murder, it was self-defense. You weren’t even in control of it. Your body just reacted.”

Jen took a hitching breath, said nothing, stared out John’s window at the blue neon sign for the hotel across the street. John went on.

“Second off, you’re not a freak.”

“Whatever. I blow things up when I look at them the wrong way. That makes me a freak.”

“Jen...”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t pay you for the things I broke, John.”

“I don’t care about the things you broke. I don’t own anything that valuable, and all of it can be replaced. Don’t worry about it.”

Jen rubbed her eyes with her hands and yawned. “I’m so tired,” she said.

“Can you sleep, do you think?”

Jen shrugged. “I have no idea. Doubt it.”

“Do me a favor and try. I think you need it, and I think maybe the nightmares might be done for tonight.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Not sure. Sometimes talking about things can help, Jen. I know you think that’s bullshit, but at least now we know I can do something for you if they do come back, right?”

Jen thought about this, and nodded. “Okay John,” she said. “I’ll try to sleep.”

* * *

Falling asleep was easier said than done, as it turned out.

John watched her from the couch, but after forty-five minutes -- or so he guessed, his alarm clock being a smoldering ruin -- Jen was still awake. Her eyes would shut, and she would begin to fall into real sleep, and then she would gasp and jerk awake.

By the fifth time, Jen looked ready to break down in tears again. She said nothing, simply looked at John with an expression of sadness and frustration. He nodded his understanding. She was so terrified of the dreams that she was having a nervous reaction to them before they even started.

John watched, wondering if perhaps he should connect again with her mind and help calm her. He thought that might be the wrong thing to do, a crutch that wouldn’t really solve anything. Jen’s eyes closed while John pondered this. Then the gasp, the jerk, and the eyes opening again. Jen’s lip trembled.

John stood up, walked across the room, and sat down on the bed. Jen looked up at him.

“No dice?” He asked.

She shook her head.

“I have an idea. You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“There’s lots of that going around,” Jen said in a hoarse whisper.

John lay down on his side so he could look her in the eyes. “Do you feel safe with me, Jen?”

“I guess so. The real question is whether you feel safe with me.”

“If I didn’t, I’d have bolted through the door when things were exploding, don’t you think?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Well, for one thing, you’re the first person I’ve met in four years that I’ve actually been able to give a shit about. That has to count for a lot. Even if you discount that, though... you said that things blow up when you look at them, right?”

Jen nodded.

John shrugged. “You looked at me three times while it was happening, and nothing hurt me.”

Jen cocked her head to one side. “I did?”

“Yes. I think whatever it is that you do, you have more control over it than you think. That’s why I’m not scared.”

Jen considered this, saying nothing.

“Roll over on your other side,” John said.

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

Jen gave him a wary, nervous look, seemed about to protest, and then changed her mind. “Okay, Storm. Those charming green eyes aren’t going to get you what they probably get from most other girls, though.”

She rolled over, putting her back to him.

“Not looking for that, at the moment,” John said.

When he moved next to her and put his arm around her, Jen went stiff as a board, making a little hissing sound between her teeth.

“I’m not *him*, Jen. Remember that. Trust me, please.”

“I can’t do this, John.”

“There’s nothing to do that you’re not already doing. This is it. I’m here, I can help, and I think this might help you remember that while you’re falling asleep.”

Jen was silent, still rigid. John kept his mouth shut, kept his arm around her waist. Slowly, by degrees, Jen relaxed. Whether it took ten minutes or thirty, John wasn’t sure, but in the end she actually moved herself backward an inch, pressing up against him.

“Decided to give it a shot?” John asked.

“I’ve... no one’s ever done this with me. Just put his arm around me like this. It scares the shit out me.”

“Why? Because you’re worried I’m going to hurt you?”

Jen shook her head. He felt her hair move against his neck. “No. Because it’s really nice.”

John smiled. “We’ll worry about whether or not that should scare you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay.”

John shut his eyes. The girl next to him was soft and warm, and that was good, but she was also someone he actually cared about, and that was better. “I’m here, Jen. Remember. I hope it’ll help you sleep. Goodnight.”

“We’ll see. Goodnight, John.”

* * *

Jen was surprised by two things when she woke up. The first was simply her continued proximity to John. He was on his back now, still asleep. She was lying on her stomach, using his chest as a pillow, one arm under her and the other thrown over him. She could hear his heart beating, could feel the warmth of his body through the cotton t-shirt. The sound, coupled with the feel of his hand on her back, contrasted with the patter of rain against the windows. It made her feel warm and safe and comfortable.

The second thing that surprised her was how good she felt. She didn't know how long she had slept, but she knew that it was a good deal longer than any other period of rest she had had in years. The feeling wasn't exactly physical, and wasn't exactly mental; it lay somewhere between the two. Like a dose of a drug she had been craving for much of her life, but didn't know she wanted.

Jen drew in a deep breath, let it out, and thought about the previous night. John knew the worst, and had refused to judge her. She had spent years living in terror that someone would discover who she was, and what she had done. Now someone knew, and rather than running for the police, he'd instead put his arms around her and helped her to sleep.

But that was last night, and today was something new. It had been years since the trauma Jen had experienced, and she could force herself to do things she wasn't comfortable with, when she wanted to. She had done so last night, and the results had been good.

Today, that scared her more than if things had gone poorly.

Jen propped herself up on one elbow and looked at John's face. He was breathing softly, sound asleep, and she smiled. Heart beating fast, she leaned down and touched her lips to his, just for a moment, her first kiss since a spin the bottle game at a friend's party when she was twelve. John murmured something but didn't wake up.

Jen got out of bed, grabbed her clothes from the nightstand, and changed in the bathroom. She emerged and stood in the middle of the room looking at the destruction she had caused. When she spoke, her voice was little more than a whisper.

"I knew you were bad for me, John," she said.

John didn't wake up. A small part of her was disappointed, as if wishing he would get out of bed and stop her. Jen shook her head, smiling sadly at herself. This was how it had to be.

She moved toward the door and paused again at its edge, looking back at the figure in the bed.

"Goodbye, John." She said.

Jen turned, opened the door, and walked through it. Oblivious, John slept on.

* * *

Part 3 -- The Wolf

He had a name once, back in the time before the change began, a normal name like everyone else. Now the boy was known as 'Wolf' to the few who spoke to him. He lived under the streets of New York, with the bums, far removed from the honor student life he had left when all of this had begun two years ago.

The change wasn't heralded by the phase of the moon, the way myths and legends and stories told him it should be. It was chaotic, random, something that defied pattern or logic. It didn't happen when he got mad, or when he slept, or because it was night time. Except sometimes it happened for any of those reasons, or a thousand more. The only thing that seemed a consistent trigger was proximity to danger.

There was one aspect of the change that never left, and it was that which earned him his name. His eyes were large, light brown, feral. They grabbed any available light and reflected it back, to the point where they sometimes seemed to glow in the dark. They looked like wolves' eyes, and so that's how the name had come to him.

Wolf knew the girl with the blue eyes, or at least knew of her. He shared a fire with her sometimes, and thought her name might be Jen. No one shared their surface names down here, really, except for Tyrone, who'd apparently been here since before the Romans killed God. Down here the girl was usually 'Blondie', or 'Blue-Eyes', or 'Bitch' although that one had only been used once and had resulted in what looked like a very painful stomp on the testicles.

She had been gone for the past two days, but now was back, clean and fed and holding an unopened bottle of Wild Turkey. She was staring at it, but Wolf thought she wasn't really looking at the bottle at all. It seemed that her thoughts were somewhere else.

Wolf liked looking at the girl with the blue eyes, and why not? She was beautiful, especially now that she'd had a shower. That she was also by all accounts completely frigid didn't really bother him. He'd never been terribly good at talking to women anyway, and consequently had never come to expect anything from them but rejection. Didn't mean he couldn't look, though.

Maybe I should ask her, Wolf thought.

"Hey," He said. "Is your name Jen?"

The girl looked up and across the fire at him. "Yeah. You're Wolf, right?"

"That's me."

"That your real name?"

Wolf shook his head. "No. They just call me that."

"Because of the eyes."

Wolf paused for a moment, then said, "Right. Yeah. The eyes."

"Do you want me to ask you your real name, or is Wolf fine?"

"Wolf is fine. It's... right."

"Okay. So... You want something, Wolf?"

"Just making conversation. Gets boring down here."

Jen tilted her head and examined him for a moment. The look made him feel self-conscious and uncomfortable, but he tried not to show it.

"You don't belong here," she said finally.

"What do you mean?"

Jen looked up, as if considering something, and then said "Who wrote 'The Crucible,' Wolf?"

"Arthur Miller," he replied without hesitation. Jen laughed.

"Yeah," she said. "You don't belong down here. Where's your deal?"

Wolf shrugged. "I have my reasons."

Jen raised the bottle as if toasting him. "Amen, brother. You and me both. You drink?"

"Not really."

“More for me, I guess,” Jen said. She made no move to open the bottle, though.

“You don’t really look like you want that,” Wolf ventured.

“Only found one other thing that helps me sleep.”

“What’s that?”

Jen looked pained for a moment, giving an odd glance toward the ceiling. When she looked back at him, she said, “Nothing I can have.”

Jen twisted the cap off the bottle, raised it to her lips, and drank.

* * *

“Bet you twenty dollars I can hit that sign over there.”

They were sitting on the edge of an old platform, past the ghosts of yellow lines that once signified the danger of oncoming trains. Now the only real danger was falling off the platform in the dark and hitting the dirt bed six feet below. Wolf wasn’t worried about that. He saw very well in the dark. Jen didn’t seem to care either, though that might’ve been because she was drunk.

“You don’t have twenty dollars,” Wolf said.

“This is true,” Jen said. “Still, watch.”

She tossed the chip of concrete across the gap. It bounced off the ‘no soliciting’ sign bolted against the opposite wall. Jen raised her arms in triumph. Wolf laughed.

“Nice shot,” he said.

“I’m the man,” Jen replied.

“I think you’re lacking certain necessary parts to make that statement.”

“SEE?!” Jen shouted, swigging from her bottle and pointing at him.

“See what?”

“The way you talk! You don’t belong here, Wolfy. Come on, tell me who you are. I won’t tell anyone, I swear to God. I keep good secrets. I kept one secret for... like... ten years, and I only told one other person, because I’m like totally in LOVE with him, but he’s gone now so that doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Where’d he go?”

“He didn’t go anywhere. He’s still up there. I’m down here. Tell me your name at least? Come on!”

“My name’s Brian, Jen. I’d have told you before, if you asked.”

“I did ask, BRIAN.”

“No, you asked if I wanted you to ask.”

Jen made a dismissive gesture. “Fuck you and your semantics. You’re supposed to say ‘You’re right, Jen. I am a fool.’”

“Why?”

“Because I’m the GIRL! Jesus, Wolfy... I mean Brian... you’re never going to get any pussy.”

Brian raised an eyebrow. “Was that an option?”

Jen laughed, but the sound was good natured. “No, sorry. Not from me. It’s not that you’re not cute, I guess. The eyes are sort of sexy. But no one gets that from me.”

“Not even the guy up there?” Brian pointed upward.

“Who, God? I don’t believe in God, but if He showed up down here shouting ‘where da pussy at?!’ I suppose probably I’d have no choice but to step up.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Not God. Mr. Surface-dweller up there, the man you’re so madly in love with.”

Jen's expression went from happy to hurt in a moment, and she looked away. When she spoke, her voice was husky, like she was fighting tears. "No," she said. "Not even him."

"Hey, whoa, Jen... I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

Jen rubbed her arm across her eyes, waved at him to shut him up, took another drink. "It's okay. Forget it."

"Okay." Brian felt terrible. This was the first time he'd really felt like he might be making a friend, in two years of living on the street. Maybe this was even someone with whom he could someday share his secret, and now he'd gone and pissed her off.

They were silent for a while. Jen kicked her legs in the air beyond the platform, smoking a cigarette and drinking from her bottle. Brian sat cross-legged. At last, Jen spoke.

"You're not forgetting it," she said.

"No. Sorry. I feel bad. I was just, you know... talking."

"Don't feel bad. I'm the one who brought him up. It's... things are fucked up. It's too dangerous for him. I stayed with him for two days and he didn't get hurt. That's a fucking miracle by itself."

"And you didn't sleep with him..."

"I don't sleep with anyone." Jen bit her lower lip, frustrated. "Christ, I wouldn't even be telling you this except I'm fucking drunk."

Brian said nothing, trying to decide whether it was better to keep asking questions or let it drop. Jen didn't give him a chance to choose.

"I wanted to!" she cried, turning to face him again. "Don't you see how bad that is?!"

"Wanted to sleep with him?"

"Yes!"

“So what’s bad about that?”

Jen made an angry sound and pitched another chunk of concrete. It clanged off the sign. “It’s fucking bad, trust me. Wanting that... I shouldn’t ever want that.”

“It’s a biological function, Jen. You meet someone, you fall in love with them, you want to sleep with them. It’s programmed into you. What’s the problem?”

Jen shook her head. “Forget about it. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay, Jen. I’ll drop it.”

“Thanks. And thanks for walking with me when I asked. You might want to leave now, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this drinking I’ve been doing so far is just the warm up. I’m about to get serious.”

* * *

Jen was raving drunk, ranting about voices and explosions, leaning against Brian for support as they trudged back toward the ladies’ room which Jen had made into her habitat. Brian couldn’t understand anything she was talking about.

“Blew his shit up GOOD!” Jen shouted. She threw the empty bottle of Wild Turkey away, and Brian heard it shatter on a nearby pile of rubble.

“I’ve no doubt,” he said, “that whatever shit it is you’re talking about, you blew it up very well.”

Jen glanced over at him, eyes wide, waving the hand that wasn’t wrapped around Brian’s shoulders. “He stopped me though. It was all like... WHAM... and then he was inside me.”

“I thought you said he didn’t sleep with you, Jen.” They were almost to the abandoned women’s room that Jen called home. Brian wasn’t sure whether he

should leave her like this, but he guessed that Jen spent most of her nights this way, and had survived so far.

“Didn’t sleep with him. Not what I meant.”

“Okay.”

Jen groaned. “I feel like shit.”

Brian gritted his teeth. “Do me a favor and don’t throw up until after you let go of me, okay?”

“Not gonna throw up. I don’t do that.”

Brian pushed open the door to the bathroom. Jen stumbled inside, and he followed. She tripped, and flopped into her pile of rags. There was a moment of quiet and then Brian heard muffled laughter. Jen’s blue eyes peaked out at him from the nest of tattered clothing.

“You gonna be okay?” He asked.

Jen sat up and nodded. “M’fine. Just need me some sleep, some good old sleep, with no dreams. The dreams are bad!”

“Okay, Jen. Do you want me to stay?”

Jen’s mood swung again. She turned and snarled at him. “No! You’ll get hurt. I hurt people! Go away!”

Brian held his hands up. “Okay. Your call. See you tomorrow, Jen?”

Jen had curled up in a fetal position on top of her bedding. She opened her eyes and looked at Brian, lower lip trembling. “Why hasn’t he come to find me?” She asked him.

“Who?” Brian asked.

Jen put her hands over her face and sobbed. “Go away,” she said through her fingers.

Brian nodded, turned, and left the bathroom. He made his way to the fire and sat down. Tyrone was there, and Milligan. They must've seen him helping her back to her spot, but neither had said anything when they passed. Now Milligan turned to him.

"What is it with that bitch? Second guy this week been getting all up close and personal with her. She giving it out, or what?"

"Go fuck yourself, Milligan," Brian said, staring into the fire. Tyrone gave a dusty, wheezing chuckle.

"Pay him no mind boy. She's a nice girl."

"She *stabbed* our friend," Milligan said.

"I heard he deserved it," Brian was trying to imagine Jen stabbing anyone, and having a hard time doing it.

"Yeah, well... Just don't go falling in love with her, trust me. You'll regret it."

"It doesn't matter, she already loves someone else. I'm just her friend."

"Guy who was down here the other day I bet. Pretty boy with the green eyes."

Brian shrugged. "Probably. Whatever. She's drunk out of her skull, and I'm going to go to sleep."

Brian stood, stretched, and headed toward his own sleeping space, a small janitor's closet on the far end of the station. There was no lock on his door, but Brian had long since put his fear behind him. After the tenth or twelfth person had run screaming from him, being afraid had started to seem somewhat pointless.

* * *

Usually when the change came, it was preceded by a few minutes of intense itching. Brian was grateful for this, as it allowed him time to get somewhere private, away from the eyes of others. The few who had seen him when in his other form had no idea who he was, had been too terrified to even

think of asking. That was probably for the best, really, since Brian was not entirely sure he could speak when it happened.

He was feeling that itching now, but it didn't matter. He'd been asleep for nearly six hours, but it was eternally dark in the chambers below Manhattan. No one would bother him. He would simply change and, sometime later, change back. That was how it went.

Of course, this would make checking in on Jen impossible, but there was little he could do about it. While he had discovered one sure-fire trigger that brought on the change, danger (and this came with no itching. It happened fast, and was outright painful), he had yet to discover anything other than time that reversed it.

In a former life, Brian had been a junior in high school, averaging a ninety-six, a member of four clubs, who played varsity soccer as a forward. He was tall, 6'3", and people often told him to play basketball, but he'd never been fond of the game. His hair was light brown, like his eyes. He was thin and surprisingly quick for his height.

He had never been with a woman, and this fact both amused and annoyed him. Jocks were supposed to get girls, and yet it seemed that Brian was always the shoulder to cry on, but never the lips to kiss. Aggravating, but funny. Here in this hole in the ground, hundreds of miles from the life he'd known, nothing had really changed.

He was still the shoulder to cry on, and so comfortable in the role that he had slipped into it the previous night without even realizing it.

Brian rolled over and tried to ignore the itching, wishing the change would just happen so he could be done with it. The increase in size wouldn't destroy this set of clothes, at least. He had started taking the precaution of going to sleep in a pair of baggy sweatpants and a double-extra-large T-shirt.

Eventually, Brian felt it happening. It wasn't painful, just bizarre. Like stretching without moving. There was a soft rustling noise as the hair grew, and he ran his tongue over his pointy teeth, elongated now. He imagined that if he so chose, these teeth could rip and tear with ease. He'd never tried. The change was not something that excited him, particularly. It didn't make him want to experiment. It was just something he lived with.

Brian sighed, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

* * *

“Brian?”

For a moment, he thought the voice was his mother, calling to make sure he was awake for school. In the past, this always used to annoy him. Of course he was awake for school. He was always awake for school. Now, it was welcome. It meant that he'd never left home, that the last two years had been some sort of bizarre dream.

“Brian, you in there? It's too fucking dark and I can't see you.”

That didn't sound like his mother. It sounded like Jen.

Brian snapped awake, terrified that she might see him while changed. He touched his face, felt smooth skin, and let out his breath, relieved. He sat up, blinking in the dark.

“Yeah, Jen, I'm here. What's up?”

“Nothin'. Just wanted to say thanks for putting up with my shit last night.”

“No big deal. Not the first drunk girl I've ever escorted home. Just the first one whose home is an abandoned ladies' room.”

Jen laughed. “Can I come in?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. Hang on; I have some candles in here somewhere. I lifted them from a truck a few weeks ago.”

“How romantic.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “Nothing says romance like an abandoned Janitor's room and some stolen candles.”

He struck a match and held it to the candle's wick, then set it on a small shelf. The large purple cylinder immediately began giving off the scent of lilacs.

“Ooh, aromatherapy! Classy, Brian. Tres classy.”

Brian rolled his eyes. He was leaning against the wall, knees at his chest, arms wrapped around his legs. Jen sat down across from him and stretched, yawning.

“Sleep well?” Brian asked.

“Never do,” Jen said in a bright tone.

“Bad dreams?” Brian ventured.

“Let’s talk about something else!” Jen said, grinning at him. “Like puppies, or how kickass it would be if I happened to have enough cash on me to go grab some pizza with a friend.”

“Do you happen to have enough cash on you to go grab some pizza with a friend?”

“By random coincidence, I do.”

“Got any friends?”

“I think so. He’s a quiet guy, keeps to himself. People who don’t know him call him ‘Wolf.’ You heard of him?”

Brian grinned, and stood up. “Yeah. He told me if you came looking for someone to go get pizza with, I should take his place.”

* * *

“Where’d you get money for pizza, anyway?” Brian asked. They were sitting on the curb in the warm, early-September sun, eating and watching the Manhattan crowds wander by.

“Well, while *some* people were sleeping, I was up looking for change. A girl with nice eyes can do pretty well for herself, if she’s willing to occasionally be mistaken for a prostitute and propositioned.”

“At ten o’clock in the morning?”

“What, you think people are only interested in fucking after dark?”

Brian laughed, nearly choked on a bite of pizza, spit it out, and doubled over coughing.

“Gross,” Jen said.

Brian wheezed. “Better I gross you out than choke to death on the street.”

Jen shrugged, smiled, ate her pizza. Brian took a drink from his soda can. He looked at Jen, then out at the city.

“We don’t belong here,” he said at last.

“Nope.”

“We’re smart, and young, and healthy... there’s no reason for us to be living in a subway. It’s crazy.”

“Yup.”

“This pizza’s the first hot meal I’ve had in weeks. Usually I end up having to shoplift stuff just to avoid trash-picking.”

“I usually just go trash-picking. Shoplifting means running, and I smoke too much for that. The booze is the important part. Long as I cover that, food is just a bonus.”

“You ever gonna tell me why you’re here, Jen?” Brian asked.

“Sure. You first, though.”

Brian rolled his eyes, and Jen laughed. “Fuck it, Brian. What was it you said? ‘I have my reasons,’ right?”

“You ever wonder if you’re going to do this for the rest of your life, Jen? Live like this, I mean?”

“Nope.”

“Not at all?”

“I don’t wonder. I know. This is my life, Brian. It won’t last long, so I’m not worried about it. I’ll drink myself to death sooner or later. Or maybe overdose. Milligan knows some guys who deal. I’ve always wanted to try. I bet it’d make sleeping real easy.”

“Don’t fucking talk like that. That’s not funny.”

Jen glanced over at him. “I’m not joking,” she said after a minute. “Sorry, Brian. I don’t have anything left to hope for.”

“There’s always something left to hope for.” Brian finished his pizza, leaned over, and tossed the greasy plate into the trash.

Jen made a noncommittal noise.

“I’m serious, Jen.” Brian said.

“Do you want the rest of this? I can’t finish it.”

“Jen...”

“Come on, man. I’ve had enough of the intervention shit, okay? I already did that, earlier this week. We’re a pair of fucking *bums*. Who cares? Do you want this pizza?”

“No.”

“Fine, fuck it.” Jen tossed it in the trash, lit a cigarette, stared out at the traffic, smoking and looking frustrated.

“I don’t get you, Jen,” Brian said after a time. Jen sighed.

“I don’t get myself,” she said.

* * *

For four days, Brian and Jen spent most of their time together. Occasionally Brian would excuse himself for no apparent reason, looking concerned, and not return for a few hours. Jen wanted to ask him what the problem was, but knew it was unfair to keep him in the dark about her own issues and not expect the same in return.

Jen neither saw nor heard anything from John in this time, and by the fourth day she had almost convinced herself she didn't care. The dreams had not come back since the night she had spent with him, though whether that was his influence or the alcohol's was impossible to say. Jen was thankful either way. She still didn't sleep well, not like the one night at John's anyway, but what she got was better than none at all.

Brian tolerated her mood swings, like she knew he would. Jen understood him instinctively, from the first night on. He was the quiet guy that in high school, all of the girls liked to talk to, but none wanted to fuck. He was too safe for them, not exciting, soft and gentle. She guessed under the surface he was as horny as any other guy, he just lacked the cockiness that fueled the ability to flirt.

Under normal circumstances, he would probably meet someone just like him in college, fall madly in love, and provide some really terrific sex for the girl, once the two of them gained some experience. Brian's circumstances, whatever they might be, were not normal. He was stuck here with Jen, and Jen couldn't stop thinking about John.

Left with few emotions she was comfortable choosing from to assign to John, she'd settled at last on anger. She supposed that wasn't fair, but she couldn't help it. He'd seemed to genuinely care, but it was obvious to her now that all that mattered to him was making the screaming in his head go away. Since this had been accomplished, there was no reason for him to come looking for her.

Fine, she thought. Good. Better off for all of us.

And yet she couldn't get those green eyes out of her mind.

Brian was away now, excused on one of his mystery errands, and Jen was sitting in their normal spot, on platform H, where light filtered down from the grates overhead. Not a lot, but enough that the area wasn't pitch black, which was better than nothing. This late in the evening, the light was mostly provided by the neon signs on the buildings above, and the whole area was bathed in a reddish-purple glow.

Jen was dangling her legs over the trestle, drinking from her bottle, smoking a cigarette. She heard a scrape behind her and turned. "Brian?"

“Nuh-uh,” said a gravelly, male voice. “Whatchoo doin’ out here all by yourself, cutie?”

Jen did not feel any immediate fear. She had dealt with this type of situation more times than she could count. She reached into her pocket, wrapped a hand around the switchblade she carried there, and said “Waiting for a friend.”

“I’m friendly,” said the man. “I could be your friend.”

“Thanks, but I have enough already. Why don’t you just keep moving?”

“What if I don’t? You gonna knife me like you did Pete?”

Jen shrugged. “If I have to.”

The figure took a step forward, and Jen could see he was big. Burly. His face was still in shadow. For the first time, Jen felt a little nervous. This was the type of guy who’d probably been threatened with a knife before.

“I can make things easy on you,” said the man.

“I sincerely doubt it.” Jen went ahead and took the knife out, pressing the button. The blade made a soft “snick” as it clicked into place. The man in the shadows chuckled.

“You should put that thing down a’fore you get hurt. I seen what knives can do to pretty faces like yours.”

Oh, Jesus, Jen thought. A tight, cold knot of fear had settled in her stomach. Not fear of what this man might do to her, no. Jen knew she would never allow him to proceed with what he had planned. She was afraid, instead, of what she might have to do to him.

“Turn around and walk away, mister, or you’re going to get hurt. I’m serious.” Jen said.

“Hard way it is, then. You shouldn’t sit with your back to door, hon. It makes this sort of shit way too easy.”

Jen felt a hand grab her right wrist, crushing and twisting, felt her hand go suddenly numb, heard the knife drop to the ground, and understood immediately

that she was trapped. Instinctively she turned, squirming, and nearly broke the second man's grip. She would have, in fact, had she not run squarely into the chest of a third man, who had come up on her left. She made a squawking noise, rebounding off his body, and stumbled backwards, landing on her rump.

The men were on her in an instant.

* * *

His tongue tasted like whiskey and rot, and it was only out of fear of whatever poisons might be running in his blood that Jen did not simply bite it off.

Instead she twisted her head, gagging, trying to get away from his mouth long enough to scream for help. She could feel his friends holding her arms down, could feel his hands groping at her breasts, could feel him grinding an obscene rhythm against her pelvis.

She managed one "Help!" before one of the two men on her side, she couldn't see which one, hit her in the face, drawing blood just below her left eye. The pain took a moment to arrive, at first there was nothing but a hot numbness. Jen felt tears in her eyes.

Please don't make me do this to them, she prayed to a God in which she didn't really believe.

His hands were scrabbling at her crotch now, unbuttoning her jeans. Jen felt him tug at them, pulling them off along with her panties, despite her wriggling. The concrete was cold and gritty on her backside.

"You motherfucker," she growled. The man laughed.

"That's right, baby. Talk dirty. I like that."

"This is your last chance. Please, I don't want to hurt you," Jen said.

"Whatever."

Jen felt powerful hands grab her knees and thrust her legs wide, felt him wedge his knees against her thighs, keeping them spread. She heard an unzipping noise.

When he sticks that in me, I'm going to kill him, she thought. I'm not going to be able to stop myself. She could feel panic and rage taking over her brain, and part of it, not a small part, welcomed the emotions. Better to let it out, better to destroy this slime than let him violate her.

Jen took a deep breath, and prepared to turn the man above her into so much raw meat, spread out across the tile wall of the abandoned subway.

“Jen, DON'T!” shouted a voice, and with a thud the man kneeling above her was knocked away by some form she couldn't make out. The two figures rolled into a shadowed alcove, and began thrashing in the darkness.

Jen felt the grip on her left arm loosen as the man holding it went to help his friend, and she swung up and sideways, clawing at the eyes of the man who held her right. She hit something soft and wet and heard a howl. Jen became aware that she was screaming, snarling, screeching nonsense words in a broken voice, and had been for some time. Both hands free, she grabbed at her pants, pulled them up, buttoned them.

The man whose eyes she had raked was still kneeling on the ground, hand over his face, shouting profanities. Jen drew her foot back like a football punter and kicked him as hard as she could in the face, following through with all her weight. Her foot caught him beneath the chin and there was a noise like billiard balls hitting each other as his jaw snapped shut. The man's head rocked backwards and he slumped, unconscious. She felt hot pain run through her calf as a muscle pulled there, but decided she would worry about it later.

Jen reached down, found her knife, and charged the lump of figures wrestling to her left.

* * *

Before she could even reach the group, one of the men stumbled backward, clutching his head in both hands and screaming in such agony that even in her maddened state, Jen was brought to a halt. She watched as he tore off down the hall, still holding his head, screeching.

“Like that, fucker?!” shouted the voice of the person who had come to her rescue, and Jen recognized it. Understanding flooded her brain, accompanied by an almost audible clicking noise, and her heart thumped heavy in her chest. John. It was John, and he had come to save her.

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. Jen couldn't even begin to process the emotions running through her at the moment. She felt as if a thousand voices were shouting in her head at once, some screaming, some sobbing, some laughing, and wondered if this was how the world seemed to John.

His shout snapped her out of her daze.

"Aahhh! What the fuck was that?"

"That was me stabbing you in the arm, asshole," growled the man who had assaulted her. "Enjoy it?"

"Actually it sucked," John said. He was backing toward her now. Jen ran up, stood next to him, holding the knife out. Her attacker was getting up off the floor, brandishing a knife of his own. Purple light reflected in his eyes, and off his grin.

"What'd you do to my friend?" He asked.

"I gave him a headache," John said. He was clutching the upper area of his right arm, just below the shoulder, with his left hand. Blood was seeping from between his fingers.

"John, are you okay?" Jen asked him.

"Been better." His teeth were clenched tightly together. "How about you?"

"I'm alive, and my sweet maidenhood is as intact as it was this morning, but I am *major* pissed off."

The man who had attacked her gurgled laughter. "Poor little thing. I was trying to be gentle. Now I'm not just going to fuck you, I'm going to cut your throat."

"Big talk," Jen said. "It's two on one."

The man reached behind him with his left hand, and when he brought it back, the purple light glinted off the cold steel barrel of a handgun.

"Odds just swung in my favor." He said.

“Ah, Christ,” John muttered. His shoulders slumped. “I can’t concentrate Jen. Run. He can’t shoot us both.”

“The fuck I will,” Jen said. “I got something better than his stupid gun anyway.”

“You got a grenade hidden somewhere, sweetheart?” The man took a step forward.

“Something like that.”

“Jen,” John said. “Don’t. You might not be able to stop, and I can’t... I can’t think right now. I can’t help you. You could bring the whole fucking place down.”

“I’m not running away, Storm. I’m not letting you get shot.”

The man in front of them waved the gun in a *pay attention* gesture. “I have no idea what the fuck either of you are talking about, so here’s the deal, I’m just going to go ahead and shoot you n...”

He never finished his sentence. From his left came a growling snarl, and a black shape, huge and fast, came hurtling from the dark passageway leading back to the central subway. The form hit the man, and they rolled twice. The gun clattered away into the dark.

In an instant the thing had regained its feet. It stood, perhaps seven feet tall, holding the man by the neck like a rag-doll and roaring. Jen and John watched, awestruck, as the thing hurled the man away with a flick of its wrist, like someone tossing a dirty shirt into a clothes hamper.

He hit the far wall hard enough to crack the tile and slumped to the ground, maybe dead, maybe just unconscious.

“What... the fuck... is that?” John asked. He felt as if his eyes might literally burst from their sockets. His whole body seemed galvanized with adrenaline, and he wondered if this was, in fact, what abject terror felt like.

The thing turned to them, and the light fell on its features. It was furry from head to toe, muscular, with powerful legs and forearms. Its hands ended in wicked claws. Its face was somewhere between human and lupine, extended but

not fully a muzzle. Bright teeth glittered in its maw. It was wearing a pair of sweatpants.

Its eyes were a warm shade of brown that seemed to collect the available light and reflect it back at the world. There was a deep sadness in those eyes, and Jen recognized them immediately.

“Oh my God,” she said in a tiny, breathless whisper. “It’s Brian.”

* * *

“You know that thing?” John asked. He wanted to back away, but as of yet was unable to convince his legs to move.

“He’s not a thing, he’s a human being,” Jen said. “At least, I think he is. Brian, are you... in there?”

She took a step forward, then stopped, unsure. The creature nodded. He voiced a series of growls, rolled his eyes in a way that was surprisingly human, and tried again. This time, with effort, he formed words.

“Jen. Still me. Just... different. I... OUCH!”

“What? Brian are you okay?”

The Brian-Wolf held up its hand, and Jen could’ve sworn it was smiling. “Yeah,” it said. “Bit my tongue. Fucking... teeth.”

“Oh, this is some fucked up, bizarre shit,” John said from behind Jen. His legs, still unable to move, suddenly gave up, and he sat down on the concrete, still holding his arm.

“Preach it, brother,” Brian said, and it was all John could do to keep from breaking into hysterical laughter. He could not think of a more surreal scenario than this, and Brian’s words were like the icing on a deranged cake.

Jen took another step forward, then a third. Now she was close enough to reach out and touch the thing in front of her. After a moment, she did, standing on tip-toe and putting her hand on his cheek. The hair there was short, but soft. Not bristly.

“Thank you for saving us, Brian,” Jen said.

“Heard you scream. Came... fast as I could. Sorry... slow. Had to find you by smell. Never talked before, either. Sound so stupid.”

“You sound fine. Is this why you go away sometimes, Brian?”

He nodded.

“You could’ve shared it with me, you know.”

“You got your secrets, I got mine.” Brian seemed to be slowly adapting to speech. The words, while still guttural, seemed like less of a struggle for him.

“As far as secrets go, turning into a giant talking werewolf is pretty fucking kickass,” John said. “Hell of a party trick. Much better than having like a third nipple or something.”

“John, it’s not funny...” Jen turned toward him and gasped. John’s face was pale, and the blood flowing from his arm was now soaking most of the right half of his shirt. “Jesus, are you okay?”

“I’m thinking probably a hospital visit is in order,” John said, and giggled. “I suggest your furry friend stay here though.”

“I’ll stay,” Brian said. “You go. Jen... when I change back, can I come find you? Want to... talk about this.” He indicated toward himself with his hands.

“Yes, Brian. Pick the closest hospital to the Bleeker entrance. We’ll be there. We’ll talk.”

“Okay.”

Jen went to John, put his arm around her shoulders, and helped him to his feet, grimacing at the pain in her leg. John growled at his own pain as he shifted his weight.

“I can’t stop the bleeding if my arm’s around your shoulder,” he said.

“Not doing to great a job either way,” Brian commented.

“Thanks for the heads-up, wolf-boy.”

“Knock it the fuck off, both of you,” Jen said. “Here, switch shoulders. Put the bad one around me and then use the good one to cover the wound.”

“I’ll get blood all over you.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

John shrugged, and did what he was told. They began to move off. Jen looked back over her shoulder at Brian. He waved, and she waved back. Soon after they turned a corner and he was lost from sight.

“Took you long enough to show up,” Jen said after a while. She was holding John’s Zippo up, using it as a source of light until they reached the powered section of the tunnel further ahead. “I thought you’d decided I wasn’t worth your time.”

John looked at her, and Jen could see genuine hurt in his eyes before the emotion was replaced with anger.

“You’re the one who walked out while I was asleep,” he said.

Jen was stunned. The idea that she might hurt John by leaving him had never crossed her mind. They made their way through the subway in silence. When they finally emerged onto the streets of Manhattan, Jen immediately began waving for cabs. Three sped past before one pulled over.

The cabbie rolled down the passenger-side window and said “I charge double if he bleeds on my seats. Plus you tip good. No other cabs stop for you, trust me.”

“I’ll pay you double either way, and tip you twenty bucks. Just fucking take me to the closest hospital,” John said.

“It is a deal.”

When they were safely in the cab, moving toward the hospital, John leaning against her shoulder, taking short breaths through his clenched teeth, Jen said, “I’m sorry for leaving, John. I’m just... I was scared of you. I’m still scared of you.”

“Yeah. We’ll have to work on that,” he said.

* * *

Interlude -- Teeth and Scalpels

The girl was screaming, or at least, he supposed, that's what she was trying to do. He very much doubted that the noises coming from behind the cloth tied around her face were an attempt at singing.

The gag ran between her teeth and behind her jaw, where it was tied in a tight series of square knots. The cloth was wet with spit and blood and tears. He'd had to hit this one in the nose, to get her to stop struggling long enough to strap her in. It had bled a lot. That was okay, but not really the type of bleeding he liked.

The man that the press would eventually begin calling Dr. Jackal had started cutting things before his tenth birthday. He liked to cut with a scalpel, because if he was fast, he could actually see the flesh split cleanly before the blood welled up. He could see the skin, and below that, layers of subcutaneous fat, spread wide and glistening like a page from an obscene magazine. Then came the blood, a trickle or a torrent, depending on where he made the cut.

When cutting cats and dogs had no longer been enough for him, he had graduated to cutting people. This had been sometime in his late teens, although time had lost most of its meaning for this man, and he could no longer remember whether his late teens had taken place recently, or many years ago. At first he had sought out those who liked to be cut, and in New York there was no shortage.

Eventually, it went too far. Eventually, the victim's struggling had not been for show. Eventually, he had watched as the light died in the eyes of a man who had simply lost too much blood to continue living.

The man who would someday be called Dr. Jackal had made a shuddering, moaning sound of joy, understanding that some line had been crossed. There could be no going back, now. He had transcended.

It would be years before the pleasure of taking life had worn dull enough that new excitement was needed, and he had begun to use his teeth on the bodies.

The girl would be dead soon. Already, her struggles were weak and listless. He had hoped this one would last longer. She was young and strong, but perhaps he had gone a bit overboard. Her clothing, what was left of it, was sopping, soaked red, dripping on the floor.

He reached out and idly flicked his wrist, and another incision opened on her belly and welled up red. The girl's head jerked upward and again that weak wailing noise escaped from around the gag. Her eyes were huge and staring, insane with terror. He could look her in the eyes without compassion. She was an object to be used for his pleasure, and that was all that mattered.

Soon she would die, and he would feast on her, taking tiny bites from tender areas. An earlobe, maybe, or the soft underside of her breast. Never from between the legs. That area he always cut first, wanting it gone, destroyed. It was unclean.

When he was finished, he would bathe her, and wear his special gloves while he rubbed her with alcohol. Then into the trunk, and out the back to his car, and then a drive until he found someplace he could burn her.

The man had killed eleven people, including the first. This girl would make it an even dozen. No one knew. It would be eight more months yet before the next kill, and the first discovery. Eight months before he grew lazy with his disposal methods for the first time and left the body somewhere that it would eventually be found.

Eight months before the press learned that the body had been assaulted with both a scalpel and a set of teeth, and he saw their name for him splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the city.

* * *

Part 4 -- Choices

The room was dark and quiet and smelled of antiseptics. The silence was broken by an occasional click from the IV machine regulating the drip of saline into John's body, and by his breathing, which was slow and steady.

John was lying on his back in the hospital bed, propped up to nearly a sitting position, asleep. He had taken sixteen stitches in his right bicep, one more scar to add to those that were already there, and they'd given him a healthy dose of painkillers. The cut was deep, but clean. The doctors said he was lucky. The artery was not a major one, and it would heal. His blood-loss had been enough that they wanted to keep him overnight, but there would be no substantial long-term damage.

Jen was sitting curled up in a chair in the corner, tired, trying not to fall asleep. The last thing anyone needed was for her to wake up from a nightmare and proceed to blow up the hospital room. The clock on the wall said it was almost three in the morning, not that late for her, but Jen felt like she had been through World War Three. She supposed that being punched, tossed around, nearly raped, and then finding out one of her friends was some sort of werewolf contributed to her exhaustion.

When they had brought John in, he had already been asleep. Jen had talked to the doctors briefly, asked if it was okay to use the shower and, when they had told her that was fine, done so. Now there was little left to do but wait for morning.

There was a knock on the door, and Jen looked over. Brian -- the human Brian -- peeked his head in. He looked clean and was wearing a new set of clothes. Jen gave him a tired wave.

"They said visiting hours were over, but I talked them into letting me stop by for a few minutes. One of the nurses is pretty young and when I said he was my best friend and I just wanted to make sure he was okay, I guess she took pity on me."

"I told them I was his girlfriend," Jen said. "I wasn't sure if they'd let me stay otherwise. Where'd you get the clothes?"

"Had some cash hidden away. I figured if I was going to try to get in here, I should look presentable. I hit the YMCA and took a shower."

“Nice. You can come in, Brian. You don’t have to stand in the doorway.”

Brian entered the room and took a seat next to her. He looked over at John.

“I’m guessing he’s your man from the surface, huh?”

Jen nodded.

“Seems like he came for you after all.”

“Yeah. I guess he did.”

“Do you love him, Jen?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know him well enough to be able to say that.”

“Fair enough.”

They were quiet for a minute. Jen looked over at him, and Brian met her gaze for a moment before looking away.

“Wow, Brian,” Jen said at last.

“Yeah. Wow.”

“I knew the eyes were different, but... wow. Now I know why you said that people calling you ‘Wolf’ was accurate.”

“I can’t control it, but it’s still me in there, no matter what it looks like.”

“I know. I heard you talk. You saved John and me. Tossed that fucker across the room. Did you kill him?”

“He was breathing when I left him,” Brian said.

“That’s probably good. You don’t want to be a murderer.”

“I don’t know if it’d be so bad, in this case,” Brian said.

Jen looked at him with sad eyes and said “It is. Trust me.”

Brian tilted his head, questioning, and said nothing. Jen shrugged.

“We’ve all got our secrets, right Brian?”

He nodded.

“I’ll fill you in on mine sometime. It’s only fair. John’s got his share, too, and I think I can get him to tell you. Then we’ll be even.”

* * *

They were quiet again for a few minutes, and then Brian said, “I’m not worried about being even. I’m just glad you’re safe. Him too, I guess, but I don’t know him.”

John stirred, and when he spoke, his voice was tired but not without humor. “I’ll take you out to dinner or something. We can learn all about each other. No open-mouth kissing, though. I’m not that kind of guy.”

Brian rolled his eyes. Jen laughed. “How you feeling, John?” she asked.

“Feel like I got stabbed in the arm,” he said. “Otherwise, not bad. Can I have more medicine yet, Jen, do you know?”

Jen glanced at the clock. “Not for another half hour, John. The nurse said four hours minimum.”

John grimaced. “I need me a morphine drip. One of those patient-controlled ones,” he said.

Jen smiled at him. “Poor baby. If it makes you feel better, my butt’s all scraped up and my leg’s killing me.”

“Jen, are you okay?” John asked. “I mean, you know... not physically, but...”

“I’m all right, John. We can talk about it later.”

“That a promise?”

“Yes.”

John nodded, ran a hand through his hair, looked over at Brian. "You look pretty normal when you're not uh... you know."

"A giant talking werewolf?"

"Yeah. Listen, thanks for saving us. Seriously. Sorry if I was being a jerk. I just barely got to Jen in time before some ugly shit happened, then I got stabbed, and then you scared the hell out of me."

"It's okay. I understand. I'm glad you got to Jen before they could do anything to her. You saved her before I saved you."

John shook his head. "No, I saved those guys. Jen wasn't in danger. Not the way you think she was."

Brian looked at him, then at Jen, confused. Jen sighed.

"It's tough to explain," she said.

"Tougher than growing fur and fangs?" Brian asked.

"Maybe not."

John sat up a little. "You could show him, Jen."

"What, you want me to go nuts right here?"

"No. I don't think you have to. I've been doing some experimenting, Jen, and you might be surprised how quickly you can gain control of the skills you have. You saw me send that guy running, right?"

Jen nodded.

"No way I would've been able to do that a week ago."

"What do you want me to do?" Jen asked.

John indicated toward the bottle of water on the nightstand. "Bump that. Don't wreck it, just bump it. I bet you can."

“If I can’t stop, are you strong enough to help me?”

“Yes, if I have to, but I won’t have to. You can control it, Jen.”

Brian looked completely lost. “What the hell are you guys talking about?”

“Sshhh,” Jen said. “Watch.”

She stared at the bottle, breathing. For a moment, there was nothing. Then, with the sound of a fist rapping once on a hard wooden door, the face of the table seemed almost to buckle momentarily. The bottle shot up in the air, twisting end over end, spraying John with water.

“Oh, holy shit...” Brian said.

“I did it!” Jen cried.

John wiped water from his face and smiled. “Little bit more than a bump, I’d say, but close enough. Congrats Jen. That’s a big step.”

“Jen, that’s incredible,” Brian said.

Jen shrugged. “That’s nothing,” she said. “Wait until John tells you what your favorite color is and what you had for breakfast yesterday.”

John grinned, and glanced at Brian. “Green, and a box of donuts he lifted from a convenience store.”

Brian sat in his chair, looking back and forth between Jen and John.

“This is... something.” he said at last. “I don’t know what this is, but it’s something, and it’s important.”

* * *

Before John or Jen could respond to Brian’s statement, a pretty young nurse stuck her head in the door and glanced at him. “Still here? I’m going to get in trouble... Just a warning: I make my last round in fifteen minutes. If you haven’t left, I’ll have to take you home with me!”

Brian looked over at her, smiled, and said “Okay, thanks.”

The nurse looked at him for a moment longer and then left. Brian turned back to John and Jen, who were giving him nearly identical, amused expressions.

“What?” He asked.

“Please tell me you recognized that invitation,” Jen said.

“He didn’t,” John said.

“What invitation?” Brian asked.

“Dude...” Jen rolled her eyes. “You and me, we gots to have a serious talk, Brian. This boy-next-door shtick is nice and all, but you’ve got *hot nurses* flirting with you. Isn’t that some kind of fantasy?”

“You need to work on some witty banter,” John said.

“Look, I’m a homeless werewolf, okay? Witty banter is not high on my list of concerns at the moment, hot nurses or not.”

“Your loss,” John said. He shrugged, and then winced. “Ouch. That was stupid.”

“Right, *anyway*... moving on. We should, uh... you know, I really don’t know what we should do,” Brian said. He looked over at Jen. “What’s next?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m staying here until they let him out. After that? John, you’re welcome to come back to the subways with us, but I think you’d like your apartment better.”

“Listen,” John said, “Brian’s right. I’ve been hearing voices for my entire life, and I’ve never run into anyone else with... talents... that remotely resemble yours, or his. This is important. I want you both to come to my place tomorrow, so we can figure out what the hell we’re supposed to be doing.”

“I’m not sure we’re ‘supposed’ to be doing anything,” Jen said.

“Maybe, maybe not. Worth talking about, don’t you think? I don’t have work tomorrow. I’ll buy lunch.”

She shrugged. "Whatever, man. It's not like I had a hot date set up or anything."

"Me either," Brian said. "Where do you live?"

John tried to reach for the nightstand with his right hand, instinctively, and winced again.

"I got it, John," Jen said, moving across the room and picking up the pen and paper. John gave her his address, and she handed the sheet to Brian.

"Okay, when should I show up?"

"Whenever you and the nurse finish breakfast," Jen said.

"Come on, seriously."

"Brian, you've got a choice here," said John. "You can go and sleep in a subway somewhere by yourself... or maybe with Tyrone. Alternately, you can go home with a hot nurse, and then stay in her bed. It's your fucking patriotic duty as a man to take the second option."

Brian glanced at the door, considering.

"She *was* pretty cute," He said at last.

* * *

Brian left with the nurse, who did her best to at least put up a pretense that she was simply doing her duty by forcing him to leave the hospital. That she did this by taking his arm in both of hers and pulling him out of the room didn't seem to bother him much.

"That should be fun," John commented.

Jen smiled. "I don't think he's ever really... you know."

"She'll teach him. If he's smart, he'll admit it up front. Then she'll not only understand when he's not real good at it, but she'll be so excited about corrupting him that it won't even matter."

Jen's smile widened to a grin, and she laughed. "I take it you're an expert."

"Practice makes perfect."

Jen nodded. "You want me to buzz a nurse for you and get some painkillers?"

"That'd be awesome."

Jen did, and in just a few minutes another nurse, this one stout and matronly, had injected a small amount of liquid into his IV tube. Less than a minute later, she was gone, and John sighed in contentment.

"Sweet Demerol," he said. "Eases the pain."

"Yes, that's... why they use it," Jen said.

"So the pleasant floating sensation is a side effect?"

"Probably, yeah."

"Mmmm. I'm going to fall asleep in about twenty minutes. You want to talk about anything before then?"

Jen pulled her chair closer to his bed, then sat back down in it. "Gee, I don't know, John. Today was pretty boring for me. Why don't you pick?"

"Right. How've you been sleeping?"

Jen glanced away. "As well as I do on any night when I'm full of booze."

"That explains the lack of screaming, but I'm guessing it still means 'not well,' right?"

She nodded.

"How'd you do the last night you spent at my place?"

Jen said nothing for a moment, looking out the window, scared and confused and torn between conflicting emotions.

“Jen?” John prompted. She turned back to look at him.

“Best sleep I’ve had in years,” she said.

John seemed about to speak, then paused.

“You’re wondering why I left, then,” Jen said.

“I thought I was the mind-reader.”

“John, I’m so scared of you. I... this whole week, all I’ve been able to think about was you. When I woke up next to you, I wanted to... I don’t know. I don’t know what I wanted, but it involved things that I never, ever thought I could ever do.”

John said nothing. Jen sighed and continued.

“I can’t say ‘I love you’ because we barely even know each other, but... you were inside my head. It wasn’t a long time, but it felt like I knew you completely, then, even though I don’t remember the details anymore. I just know that while you were there, I understood you, and I liked the person that you are a lot. Waking up next to you, God... I can’t do that anymore. I’m going to do something stupid and then I’m really going to go crazy.”

John’s expression was concerned. “I won’t ever ask you to do anything that would hurt you, Jen,” he said.

Jen shook her head and took a deep breath. She looked nervous and agitated. “That’s not the concern. I’m worried about what I might do on my own.”

“Like what?”

Jen stood suddenly and moved next to him. She bent down so that her face was close, looked into his eyes, and said, “Like this.”

She leaned in, put her lips on his, and let herself have the kiss she’d been thinking about since he had first arrived in the subway.

* * *

“If those are the kind of things you’re afraid of, Jen, then I’m happy to help you deal with your fears,” John said when she finally broke away from him.

Jen laughed, still standing next to his bed, holding his left hand in both of hers, not wanting to move away from him yet. She was scared, excited, content and confused. She felt dizzy and weak, and wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with him, lie against his chest and listen to his heart beat. She wondered if this was what being in love felt like.

“I’m sorry I left you,” she said.

John yawned. The Demerol was making it hard to stay awake. “It’s okay,” he said. “You’ve got shit you need to deal with. I understand that. I just... I’d like to help you deal with it, Jen. I thought I was helping, and then I woke up and you were gone.”

“I was afraid...” Jen stopped. She didn’t know how to explain it without sounding ridiculous.

John made a waving motion, dismissing her concerns. “I know, and it’s okay. It just took a couple of days to understand that I was being an idiot. I shouldn’t have expected you to just decide that everything was fine because you got one decent night’s sleep. I realized this wasn’t a one-night process, and went looking for you.”

“It might take a really long time, John. I might never get better... might never stop being scared. You could probably find someone else who’s ready to do a lot more than give you a kiss that may well give her nightmares for weeks.”

John nodded. “I probably could, but she wouldn’t be you.”

Jen turned a pretty shade of pink. She looked down, seeming not to know how to respond to this.

“Listen,” John said. “I don’t know the first thing about getting rape victims through psychological trauma, but I want to help. Will you let me?”

Jen nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good. That’s good. We’ll get through things, you’ll see. The dreams will go away.”

Jen looked out the window at the night and shuddered a little. "I hope you're right," she said.

John yawned again, and said, "This stuff is knocking me out. Are you okay? Can you sleep?"

"I don't know. Probably safer not to."

"Fuck safety. You look exhausted. You had a night that would leave a lot of other girls sitting in a corner somewhere, shivering and crying. You need to sleep."

"I'll try."

"Promise?"

"Yes, John."

"Okay." John paused, and for a moment she thought the drugs had at last gotten the better of him. The he yawned again, looked over at her, and grinned.

"Would I be a jerk if I asked for a goodnight kiss?"

Jen gave him a small smile, stepped forward, and leaned down again.

* * *

She slept curled up in the chair, pulled close to his bed, listening to him breathe. It wasn't the good, unbroken sleep that she had found in his apartment earlier that week, but there were no nightmares, or even the dark dreams that sometimes woke her up before they could turn into nightmares. For Jen, this was enough.

In the morning, the doctor took a cursory look at John, pronounced him fit to leave, and departed. Within half an hour, John had been released from the Hospital with a prescription for painkillers. They filled it in the hospital pharmacy.

He and Jen shared a cab ride back to his apartment, not talking much.

“You want anything to eat?” He asked as they left the cab. It was mid-morning, Wednesday, still warm out. “There’s a store down the block, or a coffee place up the street.”

Jen shrugged. “Yeah, sure. Let’s get coffee, but let’s take it back to your place in case Brian shows.”

Safely back in his apartment, John sat at one end of the couch, sipping his coffee. Jen sat down at the other end, and John looked vaguely surprised by the distance she was keeping from him, but said nothing. They ate in silence for a time, and finally Jen said, “Do you think we’re the only three in the world?”

“That can do stuff like this? No way. If there were only three people, the chances that they’d all be in New York are nonexistent. Even assuming there are lots, the fact that I met you and then you met Brian almost makes me believe in destiny. It’s crazy.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s definitely crazy. I don’t know about destiny, but everything about this is crazy.”

“I think these things are gifts, Jen. I think we need to figure out how to use them.”

“It’s a gift for you, maybe,” Jen said. “Not much of one for Brian and me.”

“Yours manifested itself in a horrible way, Jen, but that doesn’t mean you have to think of it like that forever. Brian’s is... amazing. You saw him. That guy had no hope. No idea what was even happening. Brian was so fast, and I think when he’s like that he could bench-press a tank. Sure, he can’t control it yet, but he’ll get there. I might be able to help him.”

Jen looked at John. “You’ve changed,” she said after a moment. “There’s something different. It’s like there was some anger there that’s gone now. How have you changed so fast?”

“I know things now that I wish I’d known ten years ago,” John said. “My life would’ve been different. I’m not crazy, Jen. I’m sure of it now. That’s what’s changed.”

John flexed his fingers in an unconscious gesture, trying to think of the right way to explain himself.

“Jen, I... there’s so much I can do, and it’s getting easier. There’s no more vertigo anymore. It doesn’t send me running off to puke. I spend all night practicing. And there are other things that I think of but have never tried.”

“Like?”

“Like overloading that guy’s pain circuits in the subway. I didn’t know for sure I could do that. It was a guess.”

“So that’s what you did to him, then... that’s what you meant about the headache.”

“Yes. I literally gave him a headache. A really bad one. It just takes concentration. After I got stabbed, I couldn’t get my shit together enough to do it again, otherwise we wouldn’t have needed Brian to save us.”

“How much concentration does something like that take?”

John shrugged. “Everything takes less concentration the more I do it. I can pull things out of people’s minds now almost without trying, if they’re close by.”

“John, that’s sort of... scary.”

“I know!” John was agitated. Not angry, but clearly excited and concerned. “I’m terrified. There’s so much temptation. I go to the bank and part of me wonders if I could use my abilities to rob them blind. I look at girls and wonder if I could make them get off, right in public, just by thinking at them. I don’t want to do that kind of shit. It’s... wrong. But it’s so fucking tempting.”

Jen nodded. She could understand.

“That’s why I need you and Brian around,” John continued. “I’m starting to love what I can do, and I think you guys will too. I think we can help keep each other in check, while we learn. We can help make sure we do the right things.”

John paused, ran a hand through his hair, looked at Jen as if to confirm that she understood. “I want to do the right things,” he said at last.

Jen smiled at him. “I think that’s the most important part; that you want to, I mean. I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

“I’m worried either way. Jen, this is... power. That’s what it is.”

“And power corrupts,” Jen said.

John nodded. “I’m afraid I’ll start trying to do things for good, and end up getting shit all twisted in my head. That’s happened to people before, just from political power. None of them could read minds, let alone *affect* them.”

“It’s good that you’re afraid.”

There was a buzz at the door. John glanced toward it.

“Brian’s here. Good. We might as well talk about this with him, too. I think this might be one of those ‘changes the rest of your life’ sort of things.”

“Things have already changed, John. I don’t think any of us can go back.”

John nodded, stood, and went to answer the door.

* * *

“So?” Jen asked.

Brian gave her a casual glance. “So what?”

John laughed. “Look at him play it cool. Nice, Brian.”

John had replaced his coffee table. Jen and Brian were sitting across from each other at it, eating sandwiches and potato chips. John was stretched out on the couch behind Jen.

John’s bookcase was still in a pile in the corner, and there were a few other destroyed objects scattered around. Brian had noticed these, and glanced at Jen, who had simply rolled her eyes and shook her head. Brian had opted not to mention it further.

“Oh, you want to know about Susannah!” Brian said, effecting surprise.

“If Susannah is the nurse we sent you home with last night, then yes, I do.” Jen said in a dry voice. Brian grinned.

“She’s a very nice young lady. Very... accommodating.”

John laughed again, but withheld comment.

“Did you bang her?” Jen asked. Brian nearly choked, swallowed, and looked up at Jen.

“You’re really good at doing that to me,” he said.

“Answer the question, dammit!” Jen said, grinning.

Brian shook his head. “No,” he said. “I didn’t bang her.”

“Well Jesus Christ, Brian!” Jen looked put out. “How the hell am I supposed to live vicariously through you?”

“I don’t know, Jen. Why don’t you go sleep with her?”

“Bah, that’s not what I mean. Did you do *anything*?”

“We did lots of things, yes. Just not that.”

“Why not? Come on, man, she must’ve offered.”

Brian looked embarrassed. “You’ll think I’m an idiot,” he said.

Jen stuck her tongue out at him. “I already think you’re an idiot. You can’t make it worse. Come on, Brian. It’s okay. Were you nervous?”

“No, Christ, nervousness went out the door about six seconds after we walked into her apartment. I... she was ready to go, and I was thinking about it pretty seriously but... I don’t know her, you know? I don’t *love* her.”

“Aww. That’s sweet, Brian. Seriously.” Jen gave him a soft, friendly smile.

“It is,” John said. “Very sweet, and nothing to feel bad about. You will regret it when you’re eighty, though. Mark my words.”

Brian shrugged. “Probably. It was still a pretty good night.”

“She handled it well, then?” Jen asked.

“Sure. She said there was lots of fun we could have, and I agreed. Enthusiastically. For most of the night. And then also in the morning. Sorry I’m so late, by the way.”

Jen leaned back against John’s couch, laughing and clapping her hands.

“You going to see her again, Brian?” John asked. Jen’s head was resting near his hand, and he took the opportunity to touch her hair. She jumped a bit, but then smiled at him, and didn’t move her head away. Brian’s glance flicked over and then away again.

“I don’t know,” Brian said. He stretched, yawned, and continued. “I mean, yes... but I don’t know for how long. We had fun. No doubt about that. But I think she’s looking for someone a little more, uh... challenging. Also she kind of freaked out when I told her I was nineteen.”

“Freaked out in a bad way?” Jen asked.

“Not like screaming or anything, but I think it kind of blew her mind. She’s twenty eight. She said she felt like she was robbing the cradle. I like her though... I hope she’ll get over it. After last night, she could be sixty for all I care.”

Jen laughed again. She leaned forward, finished the last of her sandwich, and grabbed the paper wrapping and took it over to the tiny kitchen in the corner, where the trash can was.

She returned to the couch and tapped John on the legs. He pulled his legs up, giving her space, and she sat down, leaning halfway against the back of the couch and halfway against the arm, looking at both of them. Her expression was serious.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s talk.”

* * *

“You really think you can help me with this, John?” Brian asked.

John made a gesture of uncertainty. “Who knows? Worth trying, I think. If you can control it, it could be useful.”

“For what?”

“Oh, come on, Brian,” Jen said. “I don’t have a list of specific jobs you should apply for, but I think we can find something useful for a giant, super-strong werewolf to do.”

Brian grinned, and nodded. “Okay, you’re probably right.”

“You said that fear triggers it?” John asked.

Brian shook his head. “Not fear. Danger. Sometimes I don’t even know I’m in danger yet when it happens, so it’s not fear. It’s more like a sixth sense. One time I changed for no reason that I could figure out, and then like a minute later these guys showed up. They were drunk and shouting and breaking shit, and I guess probably looking for someone to beat up. They found me instead.”

“Did you hurt them?” Jen asked.

“No. Just sent them running. Then after I changed back, I ended up wandering around the fucking tunnels wrapped in the remains of my shirt, looking for clothes. It sucked. That’s why I wear baggy clothes mostly, now.”

“The sweatpants were sort of amusing,” John said. “I mean, you know, after I got over feeling like I was going to piss myself in terror.”

Jen kicked him gently in the leg. “Don’t be vulgar,” she said.

“This from the girl that asked Brian point blank if he ‘banged’ the cute nurse,” John said. “Anyway, as I was saying before, I’m getting better and better with my abilities. I think you guys will, too. Practice makes perfect, and all that.”

“Where do we practice, though?” Jen asked. “You can read minds anywhere, John. If I blow up your apartment again, though, I think you’re going to get evicted.”

“That explains the bookcase,” Brian commented to himself.

John grinned. “You shoulda seen it in action, Brian. I think if I hadn’t been half-asleep at the time, it might’ve been scarier than meeting you for the first time.”

“Hey, look, that was only after you almost melted down in a diner just because I was thinking too hard at you. We’re none of us perfect!” Jen exclaimed.

“Wasn’t claiming to be,” John said.

“You almost melted down at a diner?” Brian asked.

“It’s a long story. Up until recently, the only thing I could do was hear whatever people were actively thinking about. Jen thinks... at top volume.”

“I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT!” Jen shouted, and then burst into laughter. Brian and John simply sat there, waiting for her to finish.

“To answer your original question, Jen,” John said when she was done, “I think we practice down in the subways. It’s open, it’s empty for the most part, and no one’s going to care if we blow up a bunch of old trash and bricks.”

“What happens when someone finds us, John?” Brian asked.

John shrugged. “Hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“It’s bound to happen,” Brian continued. “How do we explain the miracle of the talking werewolf, the girl who blows things up, and the guy who gives people headaches?”

Jen spoke up. “I’m not real concerned about explaining it to the people living in the subways. No one’s going to believe their shit anyway. We need to keep it from people topside, though, or it could get really bad. We’ll end up being stuck in a lab and dissected.”

“Good point,” John said. Brian nodded.

“First things first, though,” Jen said. “We need to figure out how to get Brian’s changing under control. I was a little worried about sending you home with that girl last night, man.”

“Me too, but usually I get a couple of days’ grace period, so I figured I’d be all right. How do you think you can help, John?”

“First I figured we could try to trigger it, and I could, uh... listen to your brain. Then if that didn’t work, I was thinking maybe I could try to force it to trigger, and see if I can find out what’s going on in your head that makes it happen.”

“How would you force it to trigger?”

John grinned. “Put you in danger,” he said.

* * *

Brian glanced at the clock. “Jesus,” he said. “We’ve been here five hours. Or I have anyway. I’m supposed to call Susannah and talk to her about dinner.”

“Phone’s by the bed,” John said. “I’d lend you a new set of clothes, but you’re taller than I am.”

“You don’t have to lend me anything, John. I feel bad enough eating your food and everything.”

“Don’t worry about that shit. In fact, I’ll give you and Jen some money and you can go buy some clothes. Keep them here. Whatever. It’s not an issue right now.”

“John, I can’t take your money like that,” Jen said. “It’s not fair.”

“Yeah, me either,” Brian agreed. “You seem to be doing okay, but you’re not wearing diamond necklaces that say ‘bling’ or driving a Bentley, either. We’re not looking for charity.”

“Then consider it a loan. Seriously.”

“I don’t know...” Brian looked uncomfortable.

“Man, look... I made so much in commission this week you don’t even want to know. Guy comes into the store, and the new laptop he wants isn’t even on his mind, and I talk him into it anyway. Used to be he’d have had to already be thinking about it. Now he doesn’t even have to. I just know. I did that kind of stuff all week. My boss wants to give me a medal.”

“That’s slimy,” said Jen.

“Paid for the sandwiches. And a new coffee table.” John was grinning. Jen pitched him the finger.

“Is it the right thing, though?” She asked.

John didn’t grow upset, but his smile faded away as he considered this. “No,” he said at last. “It’s not. But it’s not taking over the world, either. That guy honestly wanted a new laptop. I just made sure he bought it from me. I didn’t control him, or make him do anything. I just talked him into it because I knew he wanted it.”

“That’s a thin line,” Brian said.

John nodded. “Yeah, but it’s still a line. Right now, I’m the one with a job. I think Jen can get one pretty quickly, assuming she can sleep at night.”

“If we can get control of the part where I turn into the big bad wolf, then I can get a job too,” Brian said.

“Right,” said John. He turned to Jen. “In the interim, can you deal with me bending the definition of ‘right’ a bit to make enough money to keep us all afloat?”

“Sure,” Jen said. “Just... let’s make sure we do something to bend the line back at the end.”

“I think that’s the big question,” said Brian. “What do we do?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” John said. He reached over the arm of the couch, and picked up a tabloid newspaper. He dropped it in the middle of the coffee table, face up, and let them read the headline.

“Dr. Jackal Slays Another,” Jen read out loud. “Second Victim Found Slashed and Bitten. John... what does this mean?”

She looked up at John, confused. Brian’s expression was different. He looked almost queasy. “I get it,” he said.

“That guy’s out there killing people and chewing on them. That girl they found two months ago was fourteen. He cut her to ribbons, and then ate parts of the corpse.”

He looked up, first at Brian, then at Jen.

“This is how we do the right thing,” he said. “We find this guy, and we stop him.”

* * *

Dinner was ravioli, cooked by John and shared between him and Jen. Brian had left them to meet with Susannah, after running out to buy clothes with Jen, and then returning to borrow John’s shower. Before he left, they had made plans to meet in the subway the next day.

John wasn’t a gourmet chef, he said, but he could handle boiling pasta and warming up bottled sauce. Jen, who for the last four years had subsisted mainly on cigarettes, bourbon, and that which could be found in the trash, was certain it would be fine.

They ate sitting out on his fire escape, not talking much, listening to the sounds of New York. When they were done, Jen leaned back against the railings, stretched, lit a cigarette, and said, “So you want us to be superheroes.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far. He’s got a goofy name, but I’m sure Dr. Jackal’s just some guy. He’s not Lex Luthor.”

“Who?”

“The bad guy from Superman. Gene Hackman? Fuck it, never mind.” John waved it away.

Jen laughed. “Okay. I get the idea, and you’re right, but still... I was thinking maybe helping children, or something, not fighting bad guys.”

“How is Brian going to help children?”

Jen thought this over. “Overcoming their fear of werewolves?” she asked at last.

John laughed, lit a cigarette, looked out at the city. He was sitting on the steps, a few feet off the floor of the fire escape.

“You okay?” he asked after a while.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean in general. You’ve been kind of distant, compared to last night, and we never did talk about how you feel about what happened with those guys in the subway.”

Jen sighed. “Sorry if I seem distant. I’m... this is new for me, John.”

“I know. I’m not pushing. I just want to be sure you’re all right.”

“I am. I was so happy to see you that I got a little ahead of myself. Not that I regret it.” She smiled up at him, “But fair warning: I’m probably going to bounce back and forth a bit. It all comes in waves. Some days are better than others. Some *hours* are better than others.”

“Okay. Do what you need to do, Jen.”

Jen nodded. Doing what she needed to do was her exact intent.

“You said we’d talk about the guys...” John prompted. “Is it too soon?”

Jen shook her head. “No, it’s fine. Look, that’s... it wasn’t fun, but honestly I was more angry than anything else. I didn’t want to have to kill more people. I wasn’t afraid of being raped because that motherfucker never had a chance of that.”

John nodded. Jen looked over at him. “I won’t kill this guy, John. This Dr. Jackal. I want you to know that up front, so you’re not expecting it when the time comes. I’m never killing anyone, ever again. Not now that I know I can control myself.”

“Good. I don’t want you to, and I don’t want Brian to, and I don’t want me to either. I don’t think we need to kill him. I want to catch him, stop him, and then give him to the cops.”

“Okay.”

Jen pitched her cigarette over the balcony, got up, and sat down next to John. She wrapped her arms around him, kissed him on the neck, below the ear, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“What was that for?” John asked. He turned slightly so that Jen could better lean against him, then added, “Not that I’m complaining.”

Jen smiled. “Just doing what I need to do,” she said.

* * *

Her shirt had pulled loose from her jeans some time ago, and Jen shivered as John ran his fingers up and down the curve of her spine, under the fabric. His touch was gentle, just enough to register the contact, and as far as Jen was concerned, he could keep doing it for the rest of their lives.

They were lying on his couch, wrapped up together, kissing. Jen had lost track of how long they had been there, and didn’t much care. Her heart was racing in a combination of excitement and fear. She was terrified of this man, and what she was doing with him, but was enjoying it too much to stop.

She stopped kissing him for a moment and put her head in the space between his neck and shoulder. John’s fingers moved against her back, and Jen sighed.

“Okay?” John asked.

“Mmm-hmm.” Jen turned her head so her words wouldn’t be muffled. “Everything is very okay, and will be so long as you keep doing that.”

John laughed. “Good. Don’t be afraid to tell me if it isn’t.”

“You could just read my mind.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think that counts as doing what’s right. If you tell me, that’s giving. If I just use the voices to find out, that’s taking. There’s a difference.”

Jen understood, but it didn’t matter. She had already let John into her head, had already told him the worst things that she kept there.

“I’ll tell you,” she said, “that this is as far as I can go for now, all right?”

“That’s fine, Jen.”

“You sure?”

“You seem to have this impression that if you’re not willing to sleep with me by the end of the evening, that I’m going to walk away,” John said.

“I don’t know how this is supposed to work, if I was normal.”

“There’s no way that it’s ‘supposed’ to work, Jen. Some women go home with guys they’ve just met and sleep with them. Some don’t. You’re as normal as anyone else, I promise. You heard Brian today, so you can see it’s the same way with guys. There are all kinds of reasons for not jumping right into sex with someone.”

His fingers kept moving on her back. The touch had gone from light and teasing to something more tangible, more comforting. Jen realized she was heading toward sleep, though it was still only evening. It seemed that after years of existing on so little rest, her body now craved any and all of it that she could get.

“I didn’t ever think I’d be doing this,” she said. “You make me feel good, John. Safe. I like being with you.”

“Yeah, but eventually you’ll realize that I’m a jerk.” She could hear the grin in his voice. “It’s how it always goes.”

“You’re not a jerk.” Jen yawned, and nestled herself further in against him. “I’m so tired.”

“So sleep, then. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jen did...

And came awake with a start three hours later, looking around the dark apartment, blinking. John was asleep underneath her, and it took Jen a moment to untangle herself from his arms, being careful not to wake him up.

She went to the bathroom, ran water, splashed it on her face. She looked in the mirror, but had a hard time meeting the eyes of the woman she saw there. *What are you doing?* The woman seemed to shout at her. *What are you doing in there with that man? He doesn't have what you need.*

Jen made a small moaning sound and glanced at the bag of clothes she had bought, left lying by John's bed. Down at the bottom was a bottle, and it took only a few minutes of debate before she retrieved it.

Sitting on the edge of the bathtub so she couldn't see her face in the mirror, Jen uncapped the bottle of bourbon, brought it to her lips, and drank.

* * *

Part 5 -- Sparks and Flame

“Jesus, John, that *hurts!*”

They were under the city, in the subways, practicing. Days and weeks had passed, and though all three were still raw, their control had grown significantly.

“Cry me a river, Brian. Do you want to do this, or not?” John asked.

“Fuck off. You know I want to.” Brian’s eyes were closed, his teeth clamped shut. John was stimulating the pain centers of his brain, an action that they had found routinely triggered Brian’s metamorphosis. Brian, in turn, was trying to hold the change in check. For the most part, he was succeeding.

Behind them, Jen burst into light, sparkling laughter. “I’m sorry, Brian. It’s just... you grew a beard for a minute, and then it went away.”

Brian snorted, laughed, and lost control. Jen and John watched as he transformed into his lupine state.

“I’m never going to get used to that,” Jen said. “I’ve seen it, what... fifty times? A hundred? It blows my fucking mind.”

“You and me both,” said John. He stopped attacking Brian’s nervous system, and Brian quickly reverted back to normal.

“It still weirds me out when John reads my mind,” he said. “Or when you point at something across the room and it explodes or goes flying, Jen.”

They had found that Jen’s focus was improved significantly if she gestured at what she was attempting to affect. Over a period of time, she had fine tuned her abilities to several “settings,” ranging from “bump” to “atomize.”

“We’re all still new to this, and it’s going to seem weird to us for a very long time,” John said. “Still, we’re much better than we were. Way better.”

“Maybe,” said Jen, “But we’re still a long way from good. Blowing up stuff that’s just sitting there is one thing, John. It’s going to suck, though, when Dr. Jackal jumps on you and starts slicing away, and I panic, and then I blow both of you to bits.”

“That would indeed suck,” John said. “I think probably we should wait until you won’t do that.”

Jen stuck her tongue out at him.

“Just knowing that when the itching starts, I can force it to go away, is a lifesaver,” Brain said. “It’s happened three times while I’ve been out with Suzie. Christ, would that suck.”

“You ever going to tell her?” Jen asked.

Brian glanced away. “I’m not happy keeping secrets,” he said, “But... no. Probably not, unless I have to. I don’t think she’d understand.”

“I can see how that might be the case,” Jen said. She turned to John. “I’m hungry, boss-man. When do we get lunch?”

“I’m not in charge,” John said.

“No, you just do all of the organizing, pay all of the bills, and tell us what to do...” Jen sat down on a piece of concrete and lit a cigarette, grinning.

“Okay, maybe I’m kind of in charge,” John said. “But I’m not your boss. We’re all partners.”

“Good. I’ve heard it’s bad to have a relationship with your boss,” Jen said.

John sat down next to her. “Anyway, lunch either has to be now, or it’ll have to be just the two of you. I have to work in an hour.”

“Oh, right. Gotta be on time, now that you’re mister senior sales associate, and everything.”

John’s newfound talents had quickly earned him a promotion. Much to his amusement, they had also earned him the enmity of the other salespeople at the store he worked at. John could not have cared less about the other employees. The increase in base pay and the bump from 6% commission to 10% were well worth it.

“Right,” he said. “You know I likes to keep my baby in style.”

“Aww, you know I love you,” Brian cried. “It’s not about the money, sugar!”

Jen laughed. John rolled his eyes.

“Burritos?” Brian asked after a minute.

“I’m there,” John said.

“Fuck yeah, let’s go.” Jen said.

* * *

The bottle called to Jen Wilkens, and she couldn’t seem to stop answering it.

She’d told herself it was an isolated incident, something that wasn’t going to keep happening, a temporary setback. Her first night back with John, it had just been nerves that had woken her up. It had only taken a little bourbon before she was ready to go back and lie down with him again. Not a problem.

“Not a problem,” she said, and drank from the bottle. She kept it hidden in the dresser drawer that housed her clothes, buried under a pile of t-shirts. At first she had only used it at night, after John had fallen asleep. Then the bottle had begun calling to her during the day, when John was at work.

She would stop drinking at around six, which would allow her two hours to sober up before John got home at eight. Just before he arrived, Jen would brush her teeth to get rid of the smell of alcohol. This had become routine in the past month and a half.

They would eat a late dinner, maybe watch some television, and then get ready for bed. Getting ready for bed usually meant an extended kissing session on the couch, or in his bed, or occasionally on the floor. Jen usually started these sessions; the drinking during the afternoon seemed to enhance her desire.

Then they would sleep, and sometime in the night Jen would wake up and lie there against his chest, until the calling of the bottle drowned out the sound of his heartbeat.

Eventually he would catch her, Jen knew. It was inevitable. And then what? Probably he would throw her out, she supposed. It was only fair. John had done

so much to help her, had put up with so much from her already, that she couldn't fault him if her drinking was too much for him.

She didn't want to drink. She hated the taste of it, now, like bitter poison. Jen was reminded of some smokers she knew who said that they had reached a point where they didn't even like the cigarettes anymore. They just needed them to function. Jen needed her bourbon like that. It allowed her to stay normal, to not frighten John by giving into the waves of crushing despair or overwhelming rage she sometimes felt.

That she needed more and more of it with each passing week to accomplish this was something she tried not to think about.

Jen watched television. Smoked cigarettes. Drank. At times she practiced moving things around the coffee table with her mind. This was her life when John wasn't around. Jen wondered if it should scare her how much her world now revolved around him, but the best she could muster was a vague sense of impending doom. She had spent so long being scared that it had left her numb. Or maybe it was the booze that had done that. Jen wasn't sure.

She wondered sometimes if stopping her romantic activities with John would cease the calls she heard from the bottle. It seemed plausible. There was only one problem, really: she liked being with John, and didn't want to stop. At times, it was all she could do to keep from begging him to press her further, make her take the next step toward whatever destination was in store for them. She wanted so badly to believe that in some future world there was a Jen who was happy, and secure, and able to share all of the physical intimacy that she craved.

It was hard, during the moments in between. Every fiber of her being screamed at her, sometimes, that this was a huge mistake. It could only lead to more horror and hate. The bottle helped her through these times.

Jen sat, and smoked, and drank, and waited for John.

* * *

John's fingers teased her nipples through the cotton of her t-shirt, and Jen gasped. He had waited to touch her there for the first time until a few weeks ago, when she had taken his hands in hers and guided them, letting him know it was okay. Now, she knew, he was waiting for her to take the next step.

He had taken a shower after work and come out of the bathroom shirtless. Jen had effectively jumped him, knocking him onto the couch and kissing him. Now, she wanted more. Still a little drunk, Jen let her concerns drop, lived in the moment.

She moved her mouth away from his for a moment and spoke in a whisper near his ear. "Take my shirt off."

John paused for a moment, then murmured, "are you sure?"

Jen traced the very tip of her tongue along his upper lip and said, "please."

Even through the shirt, his touch was delicious, a feeling Jen had never known before, something to be savored. She wanted to feel his hands on her skin.

John didn't need to be asked twice. He pulled her shirt free from the waistband of her jeans, and slid it up her back. Jen arched, letting the edge of the shirt pass her breasts, then leaned sideways, took the edges from John's hands, and pulled it up over her head. She tossed it away somewhere, and leaned back against John. His skin was hot against her breasts.

Jen kissed him again, twining her tongue with his. John put his hands in her hair and kissed back. Then he moved, and Jen realized he was trying to sit up. She shifted her weight, and John worked his way out from under her. He sat on the edge of the couch for a moment, looking at her. Jen tilted her head, confused, and waited. She felt awkward and exposed without her shirt on, but didn't cover herself up. The feeling was oddly arousing.

Finally John said, "You're beautiful."

Jen blushed, smiled, looked away for a moment. "So why'd you stop?" she asked.

"Two things," John said.

Jen waited.

"First, I want you to be really sure. Not heat-of-the-moment sure, but had-a-minute-to-think-about-it sure."

“I’m sure,” Jen said, her voice quiet. She was not sure, at all, but Jen was not the type to change her mind once a decision had been made. She smiled at him again, and sat up. John took her hand and helped her off the couch.

She stood in front of him, arms at her sides. There was an interminable silence as they stood there, admiring each other, hands clasped together. There was perhaps a foot of space between them. To Jen it felt like a gulf. She wanted to feel him pressed against her again.

Finally, the silence was too much to bear. Jen’s eyes flicked down to her own chest for a moment and then back up to look at John. “So?” she said. “Are they worth the wait?”

John grinned, stepped forward, and put his hands on her hips. He kissed her right shoulder, and let his lips trail up her neck. As his lips met hers, he cupped her breasts with his hands and ran his thumbs across her nipples. Jen gasped again, and kissed harder, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his neck.

Eventually John broke away, glanced down at her breasts and said, “Yup.”

“Good.”

John took her hand and led her over to the bed. Jen slid under the covers, then held them open, inviting him to Join her.

“What was the second reason?” she prompted as he lay down next to her.

John smiled, kissed her neck, ran a finger slowly from the top of her chest to her navel.

“There’s more room over here than on the couch,” he said.

* * *

I asked her if she was sure, John thought to himself. I asked her twice. Why is she doing this?

Jen was in the bathroom. Again.

Drinking.

Again.

He'd known for four days, since waking up one night when he felt her draw away from him and leave the bed, but didn't yet know how to bring the subject up with her. He supposed if he'd paid any attention to the voices, he'd have known sooner, but these days the voices stayed firmly in the background of his mind. They were there when he needed them, but newer skills had become more important. The voices were white noise, so familiar that he barely noticed them.

He could pull the thoughts from her head now, and a part of him wanted nothing more than do so, but he had sworn to himself that he wouldn't do that type of thing... not to the people he cared about. Not without their permission. Not even if it might help him. It seemed inevitable that starting down that road would lead to abuse some day.

From the bathroom, Jen made a soft sound that John thought might have been a sob. He clenched his teeth together, wanting to help her, not knowing how. Did he confront her about it? Did he wait and hope it got better?

One thing John knew he had to do was force her to slow down her sexual exploration. It was obvious that Jen was discovering feelings within her that she'd never expected to find, and John could understand how that would be intoxicating even without the alcohol. It was something he had some control over, though. Difficult as it might be to say "No" to Jen when she was lying on top of him, requesting he remove articles of her clothing, he was going to have to do it.

John heard the water run, and the door opened. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, feigning sleep. Jen slid into bed next to him, still topless, kissed his chest, and pressed against him.

John let his eyes blink open. Trying to sound like he had just been roused from sleep, he said, "Hey. You okay? Did I feel you get up?"

"Yeah," Jen said. "Sorry. I had to use the bathroom."

Right. John thought. Out loud he said, "S'okay. It's not even that late."

"No, but you've been working hard. You should sleep." Jen's words were a little slurred, but her voice sounded tired and it might only have been from a need for sleep. John could smell the bourbon, though. He'd found it the other day,

while Jen was out practicing with Brian, and considered disposing of it. In the end, he'd simply put it back, not yet sure how he wanted to approach her.

John put his arm around Jen. She curled up against him and closed her eyes. Within minutes, she was asleep. John listened to her breathing, and wondered what his problem was. He knew he should just confront her, yet he couldn't bring himself to do it.

I think I'm falling in love with this one, he thought. I think that's what this is.

John had been with several women, had even liked some of them, but he had never loved any before. Love seemed an impossibility to him, something that normal people experienced. He'd spent so long thinking he was crazy, and now here was someone else with unexplained abilities. A beautiful, sarcastic, funny, fucked-up girl whom he thought about all day long at work. He'd never thought of any of the others like that.

She had to stop drinking, though. It was going to hurt her, sooner or later. Probably sooner. Something had to be done, and John resolved to speak to her about it the next day. He moved a bit, shifting position so that Jen wouldn't cut off the circulation to his arm. Then, kissing her forehead, he shut his eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

"He did it again." Brian slapped the paper down on the coffee table, looking grim. The headline seemed to stand off the page, bright and red and angry.

"Dr. Jackal Strikes. Third Victim Found Decapitated, Castrated," John read out loud.

"Christ," said Jen. She was smoking a cigarette, looking pale and tired, which was the norm for Jen in the mornings. Brian wondered if she was sick, but hadn't yet asked her.

He'd seen the paper after leaving Susannah's house that morning to pick up bagels, and bought a copy. After a quick breakfast, he'd left his girlfriend a note citing a work-related emergency (now that The Change was under control, Brian had taken a job at a record store), and headed for John's apartment.

Once again, he'd woken them up, standing at the door, grinning as he heard Jen grumble "Where's my fucking shirt?" from inside the apartment.

Eventually, John had opened the door, looked at Brian, rolled his eyes, and said "You're early today."

Now they were gathered in the apartment, drinking coffee (Brian had brought it from the shop on the corner) and reading the paper.

"We have to stop him," Brian said. "Now."

"We're not ready," said Jen.

"Fuck that. He's just a guy, Jen. John could take him, let alone the three of us."

"Maybe that's true," said John. "We have to find him first."

Jen looked nervous. "You're serious. We've been working together for what, six weeks? Seven? Seven weeks, and you're going to go running out to be a superhero?"

John tapped the paper. "This guy had a family, Jen. Suppose that was your brother Tim that he caught, and cut, and castrated. Would you want to be a superhero then?"

"No. I'd want to be the angel of death."

"Jen..."

"Whatever, John. I get it. I understand the point. I'm just scared, okay?"

"It's okay to be scared," Brian said. "We're all clearly fucked in the head for even thinking about doing this. But we *are* thinking about it, and I can't sit here thinking while he's killing people. Thinking won't save the next person's life. Doing might."

"Or it might get us all killed." Jen said. Her voice was bitter.

"No one's twisting your arm," John said. "You don't have to go."

Jen gave him a smoldering glance. “Fuck that, and fuck you if you really meant it. You think I’m going to let you go traipsing off to fight the bad guy while I sit here and wait to read about how he cut you up and chewed on you?”

John shrugged. “No, I don’t think that. I think you’re going to come with us and help. I just want to make sure you know what your options are.”

“I’m going.” Jen put her head in her hands.

“Jen, are you okay?” Brian asked.

“I’m fine,” Jen said without looking up.

John shot him a look, but Brian didn’t understand whatever John was trying to communicate. He shrugged at John, and held his hands out, as if to say *what?*

John shut his eyes, and after a second, Brian heard John’s voice, as if coming from the end of a long hallway.

She’s going through some shit right now. Best not to bring it up, the voice said in his mind.

Neat trick. New one? Brian thought.

Yes. It takes a lot of effort right now. And if I don’t stop soon, I’ll end up with a killer headache. Just let things drop with Jen for now, cool?

Cool.

John opened his eyes, nodded, and put a hand on Jen’s shoulder. She looked up at him, angry and scared, but unable to contain a small smile at his touch.

“We’ll be fine,” John said. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“Can you keep yourself safe, too?” She asked. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“You’d better believe it. I like myself a lot.”

“That makes two of us, then,” Jen said.

“I don’t like either of you when you get all sappy like this,” Brian commented. His voice was dry, but there was a grin on his face.

Jen rolled her eyes, but laughed a bit. John smiled.

“Let’s go find Dr. Jackal,” he said.

* * *

“This is the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard.”

They were standing out front a small, run down building in Brooklyn. The apartment building where the first known victim had lived. It was drizzling out, and Jen looked miserable. The aspirin she’d taken for her headache hadn’t kicked in yet.

“It’s not stupid. It actually makes a lot of sense, if you think about it.” Brian said.

“My head hurts too much to think about it. Explain it to me Brian.”

Brian considered making a joke about using small words, and decided against it. Normally, Jen would laugh, give him the finger, and move on. Today she might take offense.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about these powers, and I figure there has to be a logical, scientific explanation for what’s going on. I’m sure I don’t know what the exact specifics are, but let’s take John’s power, for starters.”

“Okay...”

“All thought is energy, right? It’s just neurons firing as they conduct energy. Any system built to contain energy invariably leaks. There’s no way around it. Whenever you have active current, some energy is always lost to the surrounding environment. Maybe it’s released as heat, or as light, or even just a tiny electrical current, it’s still happening.”

Jen nodded. "All right, so I buy into that. You're saying that John can pick up that energy?"

"No, John can do way more than that. He can go in and take it. But what he's doing now has more to do with energy leaks than the type of stuff he normally does."

"What he's doing now is ignoring us while we all stand out here in the fucking rain," Jen said.

Brian shook his head. "He's not ignoring us. He's concentrating. Energy leaks, Jen. It flows, but it never dissipates. It has to go somewhere. If thoughts are energy, and energy leaks, then the concept of a residual psychic imprint isn't totally off the wall."

"In other words," said John, turning to look at them, "It may be pretty dumb, but there's a good chance it's not the stupidest shit you've *ever* heard."

"Well, maybe not," Jen said. "I didn't mean to insult you, John."

"I'm not insulted. I had no idea if this was going to work or not, but we had to start somewhere. The first person that they found lived here. I wanted to see if I could catch any memories, any ghost voices left floating around in the building that might give us a clue."

"Did it work?" Brian asked.

"I'm not sure. I've got what I guess you could call a lead. This girl made a trip every couple of weeks into the Bronx. Don't know why... that part is missing... but she did it routinely. The second body was found near the Bronx. I want to go to where it was found."

"As long as we get out of this rain for awhile, that's fine," Jen said. She was starting to shiver.

"Do you want to stop and buy an umbrella somewhere?" John asked. He was wearing a baseball cap and a flannel shirt over his usual t-shirt, and this seemed enough of a barrier against the elements. Brian was wearing a pair of khakis and a polo shirt, but seemed not to mind the rain.

“Little late now,” Jen said. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s just get on the subway.”

It was only a short walk, and they were soon underground.

* * *

The gentle shaking of the subway car lulled Jen in and out of sleep. The ride was long, and an express. They had been moving for almost ten minutes without a stop. They had the car to themselves at the moment. Brian was sitting in the bank of seats across from them, arms stretched out, looking up at the ads and not speaking. Jen was curled up on the seats, her head resting on John’s leg. He was running a hand absently through her damp hair, thinking about Dr. Jackal and how they would find him.

Jen felt sick. Not nauseas or hung over, but simply debilitated. Every morning it got a little worse, and she was beginning to wonder how long it would be before it became a topic of real discussion. Brian’s asking if she was all right was the start of it, Jen knew. Soon it would get to the point where her denials would seem ridiculous. Implausible.

She wasn’t all right. Sometimes in the mornings she shook so hard that she would take extra time in the shower, to ensure that John was off to work before she left the bathroom. Sometimes she had to struggle not to vomit. Sometimes she was so weak that the effort of making even a simple breakfast left her weeping. Usually it got better as the day went on, and by the early afternoon Jen would be thinking about the bottle.

Thinking led inevitably to doing, and the cycle began again.

The speed at which her body was failing her alarmed Jen. It was as if her systems had tolerated the alcohol without complaint for years and then, after a few nights without, had given up when the inundation had begun again. *Okay, her body was saying, enough. I give up.*

Jen wanted to stop drinking; she just didn’t know how, and she was terrified to ask John for help. He’d already given her so much. Room and board and acceptance, compassion, understanding. She knew now what it felt like to desire, and to be desired; she understood the need to feel a lover’s hands on her skin. She hoped that soon she would have the courage to ask for more. Jen had never had an orgasm. She wanted to have one before she died.

She was beginning to worry that this didn't give her long to wait.

The aspirin had taken the edge off the headache, at least, but Jen still felt sick and weak, and wondered whether she would be in any shape to perform should they manage to find what they were looking for. She sighed, and felt John's fingers stop for a moment, then resumed their gentle motion.

"You okay?" he asked her.

Jen shook her head and, realizing that this wasn't an effective gesture when resting against his leg, said, "No."

John said nothing. He seemed to be waiting for her to expand on her statement. His fingers kept moving, and Jen marveled at how reassuring the touch was. She wondered how she had gone so many years without letting anyone near her.

"We need to talk," Jen said finally.

"I know."

His voice was soft, but the tone made it obvious what he meant. Yes, he knew they needed to talk, but that wasn't what he'd intended her to hear in the words. What John was saying was that he knew. Everything. Jen drew in a shuddery breath, trying to keep from crying.

"Tonight?" John asked after a moment.

"Okay."

Jen looked over at Brian. He was staring serenely into space, doing his best to not hear them at that particular moment. She felt an overwhelming surge of emotion, love for these two men who had so suddenly become a part of her life. Romantic love for John, platonic love for Brian, but love just the same for both. She couldn't imagine her life without them, now.

Jen sat up. She kissed John on the cheek and said, "We'll talk after dinner. I promise."

* * *

The abandoned factory loomed in the murky, failing light like some ruin from an ancient time. Its crumbling bricks were coated with layers of graffiti and lichen and moss, windows broken and boarded. The drizzle had become a mist, and two clay smokestacks stretched up into it and disappeared. There was a line of police tape, broken and flapping in the wind, attached to the heavy wooden front doors. These were bolted shut by a new lock, large and difficult to pick.

It seemed that the building had not been disturbed since the body was found. This was about to change.

“Can you break it, Jen?” John asked. He was holding the heavy padlock in his hands, inspecting it.

“I can blow the doors in if I have to,” said Jen. “I think I can handle that little lock.”

“Why would he dump the body here?” Brian asked. “It’s a huge, abandoned building. You know people are living in it. That’s how it got found... some homeless person stumbled over it, figured there might be a reward, and called it in.”

John shrugged. “Why would you cut someone up, wait for them to die, and then eat their nose off? This guy’s not playing with a full deck, Bri.”

“No, but there’s something...” Brian’s voice trailed off as he thought. Finally he said, “fuck it. Let’s go inside.”

“Fire in the hole,” Jen said listlessly, and waved her hand at the lock. It exploded with a colossal noise, but the force was directed away from them, leaving the group unharmed. The door was not so lucky. The metal shrapnel blew a hole in it the size of a fist.

John and Brian had flinched backward instinctively, now they turned and looked at Jen.

“What? I *said* ‘fire in the hole’ dammit.”

“No kidding,” said Brian. “And now everyone in a three block radius knows it. Here’s hoping no one calls the cops.”

“If we get inside quickly, they may write it off as kids playing with fire crackers,” John said. “Let’s go.”

Inside was dark, and damp, and smelled of mold. The walls and floors, warped with time and moisture, were covered with a slick sheet of grime and moss. Dirty grey light filtered in from the cracks between the boards over the windows, but it became obvious that they would need flashlights to do any substantial exploring.

“It’s too dark,” Jen said.

“Thanks Jen,” Brian said. “Anything else you want to tell us? How about ‘snow is cold’ or ‘flowers smell nice?’”

“When’d you grow a sense of humor, wolf-boy? Or is it just on loan from someone else?” Jen asked.

John turned to face them. “Guys. Come on. Give me a second.”

“Do your thing, John. We’ll be quiet.” Jen lit a cigarette and stuck her tongue out at Brian, who gave her the finger.

John closed his eyes and concentrated. The building was full of whispers, but they were too numerous and fragmented to parse. He looked instead for any live thoughts, any indication that they were not alone in this place.

After a moment he opened his eyes and looked at his friends.

“There are people here,” John said. “They’re below us. I think it’s important that we go down there.”

* * *

The basement was pitch black, and they had once again resorted to lighters to give them any illumination at all. Jen held hers aloft. John held his lower. Between the two, they were able to see in perhaps a six foot sphere.

“I take back what I said earlier,” Jen muttered. “This, right here, is the stupidest shit ever.”

“I don’t see why we don’t just go get some flashlights,” Brian said. “This is fucking crazy. Where are we going, John?”

“We won’t need flashlights in a minute,” John said. They were nearing the end of the room.

“No shit,” Jen said. “We’re going to run out of room to explore.”

John stopped, knelt down, and held his lighter near the ground. The flickering light showed the edges of a drainage grating.

“No we’re not,” He said.

The grate opened with a rusty squeal, and even Jen had to admit that the speck of light at the bottom was not her imagination. Whoever was down there, they had power.

“Well that’s great, John.” Jen said. “You’ve discovered the rabbit hole. I suppose we can just jump in, float gently to the bottom, and then ride a river of tears until the field mouse fishes us out...”

“What the hell are you talking about?” John asked.

“Alice in Wonderland,” Brian answered for her. He knelt down and looked. “I think we can climb, though. No need to jump.”

“How are we going to climb?” Jen asked.

“There are ladder rungs on the far side,” Brian said. “See?”

“No. The rest of us don’t see in the dark like you do.”

“Show us, Brian,” John said, handing his lighter over.

Brian held it down in the shaft. At the far end, they could see a series of steel rungs. The edges of these were rusted, but the centers were smoothed and worn with use.

“I bet those will hold us,” Brian said.

John nodded. “Who’s first?”

“Oh, Christ...” Jen muttered.

“I’ll go first. Worst case scenario, if one breaks, I can wolf it up and probably survive the fall.”

“Wolf it up?” John’s expression was amused.

“Doesn’t quite have the same ring as ‘Hulk Out,’ huh? Well, whatever. You get the idea.”

“Brian, John, come on... this is crazy.” Jen’s voice seemed to hold little hope that she could talk them out of it.

“You’re the one who didn’t want to stay home, Blondie. Let’s do this thing.” Brian tested his weight on the first rung and, finding it sturdy, began to descend.

“Blondie?” Jen said to no one in particular. She waited until Brian’s head was out of the way, and then followed him.

John went last and, after pausing for a moment for one last look around the darkened basement, closed the grate behind him.

* * *

“How far do you think this thing runs?” Jen asked.

They had been following the subway tracks for what seemed like miles, with no end in sight. The tracks were rusty and covered in dust, obviously unused, but with the exception of an occasional dark patch, old fluorescent lights still glowed beneath their cracked and yellowed casings. Many had failed, many more flickered, but there was still enough light to follow the tracks by.

Brian shrugged. “We’ve walked at least a mile. Gotta be. Who knows how far it goes? John, this is like an expressway. You see all the branches? I bet you can get into all kinds of places from this tunnel.”

John was walking slightly behind, head down, concentrating. He looked up at Brian and said, “They told us to come this way for a reason. One of these tunnels leads to him.”

The 'they' in question had been a group of homeless people who were none too happy about having their space invaded. Ignoring the grimaces, John had asked them if they had seen anyone or anything strange in the tunnels. No response had been forthcoming until he pulled out a twenty. That had earned a grudging "go that way" and a couple of pointing fingers.

"How do you know?" Jen asked. "How do you know that Dr. Jackal's ever been here?"

"Call it a hunch," John said. "I'm not hearing specific voices, but I can feel... something."

"The tone of your voice doesn't fill me with overwhelming confidence, John," Brian said. "Not that I don't believe you, but you don't sound happy."

John shook his head. "It's bad," he said. "It's bad, and it's getting worse. We're almost there."

"Where?" asked Jen.

"There." John pointed. Up ahead, perhaps a quarter of a mile, they could see a tunnel branching off to the left, a black hole leading to the unknown.

"Looks cozy," Brian said.

"We have to go in there?" Jen asked.

"We do." John had caught up with them while they were talking, and now took the lead. They followed him in silence. Brian glanced at Jen, questioning, and she returned the look, shrugging. John was the leader, whether he liked it or not. This was his party, and neither of them could do much more than follow along.

The tunnel's darkness required them to bring out the lighters again. John's Zippo was guttering, running low on fuel. Jen's disposable lighter threw off less of a glow, but seemed to still be going strong.

"I hope this doesn't go too far. John, do you know how far this goes?"

John turned to look back at her, and Jen was startled by how pale and haggard he looked. "No," he said. "Sorry."

“Jesus, John, are you okay?”

John trudged forward, holding his lighter out. His hand was shaking. “The girl,” he said. “The one from Jersey. She’s... I can hear her. Screaming. Her mouth is bound, and he’s dragging her by her feet, but in her head she’s screaming and praying to God.”

Neither Jen nor Brian had anything to say to this, so they walked in silence again for a time. The tunnel opened out into a cylindrical area, several stories tall. A faint glow from lights near the top allowed enough visibility to make out a spiral staircase leading around the edge of the room, up two stories to a door.

“God didn’t answer her,” John said. He closed his lighter with a snap and turned to face Jen and Brian.

“There’s someone else here.”

* * *

“Stand right where you are and don’t move, or I’ll shoot one of you.”

The voice was male, and seemed reasonably young. It filtered down from the shadows above. John glanced up, unsurprised.

“You’re not him,” he said.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, so I guess not.”

“We’re not looking for trouble with you,” Jen said. “If you’re not the guy who’s been killing people and eating them.”

“Lady, I don’t even eat meat and *don’t you fucking take that step, asshole!* I will put a bullet between your pretty friend’s eyes.”

John had been thinking about moving. Now, with Jen in danger, he stopped.

“So, what...” said Brian. “Do we just stand here until all four of us starve to death?”

“First you tell me why you’re here. Then you turn around and walk away,” said the voice. Its owner moved into a shaft of light on a balcony above the doorway, giving the group their first good look at him. He was young, probably still a teenager, and thin, wearing a pair of baggy cargo pants and an olive-green t-shirt. He had long brown hair that he kept in a ponytail. He was holding a mean-looking six-chambered revolver.

“I told you why we’re here. We’re looking for Dr. Jackal,” said Jen.

“He doesn’t want to be found,” said the kid with the gun. “Now fuck off.”

“What are you, his bodyguard?” Brian asked. “Why are you protecting that lunatic?”

“What part of ‘fuck off’ did you not understand? I don’t need to justify myself to you. Go on. Get the hell out of here and don’t come back.”

“Oh, fuck this action,” Jen said, her voice exasperated. She had not come all of this way to turn around simply because some random kid was pointing a gun at her. She waved her hand in the direction of the gun, and the young man gave a startled shout as it was torn from his grip and thrown across the room.

John was in action even while it was happening, racing toward the stairs. He wasn’t sure what he planned to do when he reached the kid, but he expected that there would be a chase, and wanted a head start. This wasn’t Dr. Jackal, but it was the next link John needed in order to find the murderer.

The kid didn’t run. He turned instead to face John, head tilted, and John was surprised to see that their adversary was actually grinning. He raised his right hand, and John had time to think, *something is definitely wrong here*.

When the bolt of lightning flashed from the young man’s extended palm and struck John in the chest, it blew him backwards off the stairs as if he’d been hit by a car. There was a crackling, sizzling noise and for a moment all that Jen and Brian could see were white streaks across their vision. Jen was screaming, looking around frantically, trying to see where John had landed. Brian had instinctively changed forms.

His vision cleared first, and he looked up in time to see the kid disappearing through the door at the top of the stairs. Brian shouted, and began to run after him, when there was another flash and the sizzling of sparks. The

wooden door began to burn, and the fire spread quickly to the heavy support beams that framed the room.

“Well, fuck...” Brian said, pausing in the middle of the stairs. By the time he could have reached the hallway, it had become a blazing inferno.

“Brian!” Jen was calling him. He turned and looked down at her. Jen was kneeling over John’s body, which was lying on its back. Trails of smoke curled up from John’s chest, swirling in the flickering orange light. Jen turned to look at Brian, and he could see the fire reflecting in the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“Brian, he’s not breathing,” Jen said. “Brian, he’s not breathing. Brian, he’s not breathing.”

Over and over, as Brian raced down the stairs, Jen said this, her voice growing faster, more hoarse and hysterical with every repetition.

Brian dropped to his knees and slid across the dirt floor, coming to a stop next to John’s body. In the background, Jen was now sobbing. Brian looked at John, trying to fight the panic threatening to overwhelm him.

“Brain he’s not *breathing!*” wailed Jen. She was clutching John’s right hand to her chest.

“No,” said Brian. “No, he’s not.”

* * *

“One... two... three... four... breathe!”

John’s chest was warm to the touch, like a roast that has come out of the oven and rested for a short period of time. Brian was pressing down on it hard, in time with his counting. Every fifth push, he yelled for Jen to breathe. She pressed her lips to John’s, breathed for him, trying to keep him alive.

In between breaths, Jen was weeping, babbling, making little whimpering noises, begging John to wake up. They had dragged him into the darkened tunnel, away from the wooden beams and the risk of fire. Soon, though, they would have to move again. The air was filling with smoke.

“... three... four... breathe, Jen!” Brian shouted. He was exhausted, and not entirely sure that he was even correctly performing the CPR. He had last done any sort of drill four years ago, in a health class.

Jen screamed “Come on!” at the inert form and lowered her mouth to John’s. She breathed for him, broke away, and put her hands over her face. “Don’t you fucking leave me,” she sobbed, her voice broken and miserable.

John jerked, coughed, drew in a rattling breath like a man finally breaking the surface after being submerged for far too long. He coughed again, breathed again, and Jen took her hands away from her face, grinning radiantly.

“Oh, Brian, thank you! Oh, you did it! You saved him!” she cried, throwing her arms around Brian and kissing him on the cheek.

“We did it. For now. We’ve got to get him out of here, Jen.” Brian said.

John was still coughing. Every breath he took brought smoke into his lungs. He blinked his eyes, glanced at Brian, and said “I second that.”

“Can you walk?” Brian asked.

“I have no idea. Did I just die?”

“Yeah, for a little while. You’re better now.”

“Did you save my life?”

“Yeah. Jen helped. When we get to the surface, by the way, I’m going to pass out. Just letting you know. Right now, I’m high as a kite on adrenaline, so let’s get the fuck out of here.” Brian moved from his kneeling position to standing. He extended one hand each to Jen and John. Jen stood first, and then joined Brian in helping John to his feet. When he got there, Jen wrapped her arms around him for a moment.

“Ouch. Careful, Jen. My chest hurts,” John said.

“It sort of got burnt when the lightning shot out of that guy’s hands, and then I was pounding on it,” Brian said. “Come on, man. If you fucking asphyxiate down here after I saved your life, I’m going to kill you.”

“Wait, lightning shot out of his hands?”

“No, I won’t wait. Let’s go.” Brian began moving. John followed, with Jen helping to support him.

“Did lightning really shoot out of his hands?” John asked her. Jen nodded, still weeping.

“Oh. Wow. Why are you crying?”

Jen’s expression was incredulous. “Because I thought you were dead!”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, I’m a little confused right now.”

“You got hit with lightning and died,” Brian said. “I would assume you’re in shock. We’re probably not supposed to be moving you.”

“Not a lot of choice,” John said.

“No.”

“Where are we going?” Jen asked.

“The surface. Fastest way we can get there,” Brian replied. The orange glow from the fire behind them was fading. “John, give me your lighter.”

“We fucked up,” John said, handing the Zippo over. “We fucked it all up. I wasn’t expecting lightning to come out of his hands. God damn it.”

“John...” Jen began.

“No,” he said, angry. “I know, I know. ‘You’re hurt. Stop worrying about Dr. Jackal.’ I can hear you in my head, Jen. I’m sorry, I’m trying not to spy on you, but I can’t help it right now.”

“It’s okay, John.”

“Nothing is okay. I’m hurt, and I don’t have time to be hurt.” John said. “That kid needs our help. If we don’t find him again, soon, Dr. Jackal is going to kill his sister.”

Part 6 -- Aftermath

The hospital. Again.

It was a different hospital -- Brian hadn't wanted to try and explain to Susannah why his friend had been stabbed one month and electrocuted the next - - but to Jen, they were all the same. John was in the bed, and the only noises were his breathing and the soft sounds of various medical equipment. The only difference was that this time, John was awake. He was staring out the window, lost in thought.

The doctors had bought the story that he, Jen and Brian had been captivated by the concept of "Urban Spelunking." The fad was growing in popularity, despite its risks, and more and more people were coming into the hospital with various injuries they'd sustained exploring the abandoned subways and buildings of New York.

They'd told John that he was lucky. The electricity had stopped his heart cold, and burnt his chest quite badly, but didn't seem to have burned him internally, which could have caused massive havoc. Still, John owed Brian his life, and once the shock had worn off and John had become aware of just how close he had come to dying, he had thanked Brian profusely.

Now, Brian was gone, out with Susannah, and it was just Jen and John, alone in the hospital, again.

Jen shifted position to keep her legs from falling asleep, and continued to watch John. She didn't want to take her eyes off him even for an instant, still not convinced that someone could have their heart stop and survive relatively unscathed. John heard the movement, looked over at her, and gave her a small smile.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you down there," he said.

"It's okay. You're alive. Everything is okay," Jen said.

John shook his head. "No, it's not, but I'm glad to be alive. Listen, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. You're the one who got blasted, John."

“No, I don’t mean that, I...” he paused, looking away, frustrated.

Jen said nothing, waiting for him to go on. Eventually, John looked up at her again, and held her eyes with his.

“It kills me that you’re drinking again and I don’t know how to help you,” he said. “It’s my fault. You’re pushing yourself with me, because you think I need to get into your pants as soon as possible, or something. You’re hurting yourself, because of me, and I don’t know how to help.”

Jen stood up, crossed the room, and sat down on the side of the bed. She took John’s hand.

“I’m drinking because I’m scared. I drink during the day because you’re not there. I drink at night because I’m afraid the dreams will come back if I don’t. I didn’t want to bother you with it. It’s too much, John... you’ve already done so much for me.”

“Not enough, though. I thought I was helping you, but I’m not. Jen, I want to help you. If I’d known that you were scared, I’d have slowed down.”

Jen shook her head. “It’s not that, John. I mean it is, sort of, but I’m not pushing for you. I know you’ll wait. I’m pushing for me. John, I like it when you kiss me. I like it when you touch me. I... there are things I want you to teach me, John. Things that I think probably are beautiful.”

John nodded.

“Most of me wants that. But another part of me is scared. The booze has always worked. It’s always helped me.”

“But now it’s making you sick,” John said.

Jen nodded, biting her lip. “I don’t know what to do,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t even want it, but I can’t *stop*.”

“What you need to do is understand that you can tell me anything, Jen. You don’t have to worry about bothering me, or how much is too much. There is no ‘too much.’ ‘Too much’ is flat-out impossible.”

“Why?” Jen asked.

John looked surprised at the question. “Because I love you,” he said.

* * *

Jen stared at him for a moment. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over her cheeks. John wiped them away with his thumb, and Jen smiled at him.

“You okay?” He asked

“No one’s ever said that to me. I mean, other than my dad.”

“Does my saying it make you feel better?” John asked.

Jen nodded. She took his hand in hers and sat looking at it, tracing small patterns on his palm with her thumb. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. More silence. Jen sighed.

“Is it hard for you to say it, Jen?”

Another nod.

“You don’t have to. It’s okay.”

Jen put her hands over her face. John sat up, put his arms around her, and leaned back against the bed. Jen curled up against him and for a long time they simply lay there, saying nothing.

“I want to,” Jen said at last.

“Want to what?”

“Say it. I’m scared, though. God, John, I’m so tired of being scared of everything.”

“We can work on that, too, then. First thing, though, is that you need to stop drinking. It’s going to kill you, Jen.”

“I don’t understand why I can’t stop. It’s just booze. I don’t even like it anymore.”

“It’s an addiction, Jen. You’re physically and mentally dependent on it. That’s not the kind of thing that most people just go ‘oh, hey, fuck it’ and stop doing. I’ve been trying to quit smoking for three years, and still haven’t managed to go for more than a month.”

“That sucks,” Jen said.

“It does, but I keep trying. You’ll have to keep trying, too. You’re going to wake up at night and it’s going to be tempting. I want you to know that I’m here to help. You can wake me up. I’ll talk to you, play cards with you, go for a walk with you... whatever you need.”

“I don’t understand how you can be this understanding, John. If I were you, I’d have punched me in the teeth and kicked me out a long time ago.”

“That’s how I know I love you... feeling like this about everything. I’ve been a real dick at times, to women who probably didn’t deserve it. I broke up with one girl because after sex she said ‘goodnight, I love you’. That was it. Just once, and she was mostly asleep when she said it. I sat down with her the next day and told her we should start seeing other people.”

“That seems like a strange reason to break up with someone.”

“I guess probably it is, but at the time I thought I was a lunatic and the last thing I wanted was anyone falling in love with me. Now? Jen, I hope some day you’ll say that to me. I hope I can make you comfortable and happy enough that you’ll be able to say it, and mean it.”

Jen was quiet for a time, resting against him. Finally she said, “I’m probably not supposed to do this... lie here like this. The doctors will yell at me.”

“Fuck them,” John said. “I’m okay. My chest barely hurts, and I like having you here.”

Jen shuddered. “Your chest... I thought you were dead, John. I thought you were gone.”

“But I’m not.”

“I don’t want to go back after Dr. Jackal. Please, can we give this up?”

“That kid needs our help, Jen. I didn’t have time to pick everything up, but I know enough. Jackal has his sister somewhere, and he’s using her as leverage to get the kid to do what he wants.”

“That ‘kid’ almost killed you!”

“Yeah, but now I know what he can do. He won’t get that chance again.”

Jen shifted position so she could look up at him. “How can you be sure?”

John shrugged. “Nothing is sure, Jen. Nothing is ever sure.”

“So you don’t worry about anything?” Jen asked.

John laughed. “I worry about things all the time. You have to try not to let it paralyze you.”

“I’m not very good at that.”

“We’re working on it, right?”

“Guess so.” Jen yawned, then sat up and stretched. “The nurse really *is* going to yell at me, John. I’ll sleep in the other bed, like I’m supposed to.”

John held her hand for a moment, keeping her from walking away from the bed. Jen looked at him, confused.

“Don’t be angry with me,” John said. “I’m trying to do the right thing, Jen.”

She gave him a tired smile and shook her head. “I’m not angry with you, John. I know what you’re trying to do. It’s just been a long time since I was worried about doing the right thing. Give me time to adjust, okay?”

“Deal.”

Jen leaned down, kissed him goodnight, and moved toward the second bed.

* * *

It was four days before they would dismiss him from the hospital. John considered simply getting up and leaving on his own, but Jen forbid him from doing so, insisting that he stay until the doctors cleared him to leave. His arguments about the woman being held in captivity fell on deaf ears. Jen insisted that John would be no help to that woman if he were beaten to a pulp, which is what she would do to him if he disobeyed the doctors.

She went to the apartment several times during John's hospital stay, to pick up clothes and for various other reasons. Every time she was there, the bottle called, but Jen resisted it. The first few trips were bad, and Jen had left the apartment bathed in a cold sweat, having to fight with every step not to turn and bolt back inside. She wanted to throw the liquor away, but was afraid to go that close to it.

Now they were home at last, sitting in John's apartment with Brian, discussing the future of their attempts to locate Dr. Jackal.

"I don't think we can go back to that subway," Brian said.

John shook his head. "No, it's pointless. We can't get to him that way anymore, not after the fire. We have to figure out where we were, though, in terms of the surface. It's important."

"I can go to the library tomorrow. Suzie is on one of her crappy eight-to-four shifts at the hospital, so she'll be sleeping all day anyway."

"Poor Brian," said Jen from the kitchen area, where she was pouring drinks. "No sweet, sweet loving for you."

"I get plenty of sweet, sweet loving, thank you," Brian said, trying to sound offended.

Jen laughed, returning to the living area and setting glasses down on the coffee table. "I'm sure you do," she said.

"Anyway," said John, "yes, it'd be good if you could do that, Brian. I start back to work tomorrow."

"I still think you're crazy," Jen said. "Your boss offered you two weeks to recover."

“I need the money, Jen. We need the money. In a way we’re lucky I’m the one who got hurt. I have insurance. You and Brian don’t.”

“I get some after sixty days, but Suzie says it’ll probably suck,” Brian said.

John nodded. “It probably will, but it’s better than none. Hospital bills rack up fast. We need available cash for emergencies. I need to be working.”

“I know, I know,” Jen said. “I’m just going to be bored sitting around.”

“Poor Jen,” Brian said. “No sweet, sweet loving for you.”

Jen stuck her tongue out at him. John rolled his eyes.

“Discussion of our sex lives aside,” he said, “we need to find Dr. Jackal as soon as possible. Brian, can you come over tomorrow night?”

“Sure, after Susannah heads out to work I’ve got nothing going on. I can be here by like eight-thirty. That work?”

“Should be fine. You want us to hold dinner until you get here? We can snag a pizza or something.”

“Nah. I’ll eat with Suzie before she leaves. Speaking of which, I’ve gotta go.” Brian stood, stretched, and headed for the door. “See you tomorrow.”

John and Jen said goodbye and watched Brian leave. John got up from the couch, crossed the room, and flopped facedown on the bed.

“I’m beat,” he said. “I never sleep well in hospitals.”

Jen lay down, partially on top of him, and kissed the back of his neck. “A wise man once said to me ‘So sleep. I’m not going anywhere.’”

“Mmm,” John said. “That’s good advice.”

“I thought so.” Jen reached over and set John’s alarm clock to go off in the morning. By the time she finished, John was asleep, still lying on his stomach, wearing his shoes. Jen laughed, curled up next to him, and closed her eyes.

* * *

“John? John, please wake up!”

Jen’s voice was calling him up from the depths of sleep, and there was an edge to it that made John force himself awake as quickly as he could.

“Jen? You okay? What’s going on?” John sat up in the dark, and felt Jen wrap her arms around him and bury her face in his chest. She spoke words, but they were muffled and incoherent. John hugged her for a moment, reaching over to turn on the light.

John wasn’t wearing a shirt, and he could feel tears against his skin. He reached down, unwound Jen’s arms, and gently pushed her back.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Sorry for what?” John asked.

“I didn’t want to. I’m sorry. I didn’t... but I couldn’t... I’m sorry!”

John took her head in his hands, kissed her forehead, kissed her lips, tasted bourbon there, and drew away.

“Oh,” he said.

Jen covered her face with her hands and sobbed. “I wish I was dead,” she said.

“I don’t,” John said. “Jen, what happened? Jen... Christ, come here.”

He put his arms around her again, and Jen clutched at him. Slowly, she got herself under control.

“What happened?” John asked again, when she had stopped crying.

“I had a nightmare.”

“Your uncle?”

Jen shook her head. “No. I... it was in the tunnels, when we went to find Dr. Jackal. We couldn’t get your heart to work. I was screaming and Brian was dragging me away and we were leaving you for the fire. Then I woke up.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up, Jen?”

“I was confused, and scared. John, I’m sorry. I didn’t even mean to. I wasn’t even thinking. I was just so happy to be awake and all I wanted was to make sure the dream didn’t come back and I had the bottle in my mouth before I even realized what I was doing. I only took one drink. Then I woke you up. I’m sorry!” Jen’s voice was becoming frantic again.

“Jen, it’s okay. Relax. It’s one drink.”

“But I promised I’d stop! I thought you’d be pissed. I was scared to wake you up but then I started worrying that maybe you were still hurt and that’s why you didn’t wake up when I got out of bed, and then I couldn’t stop thinking about that. I sat up listening to your breathing for a while but I got too scared.”

John was quiet for a moment, considering. Jen let go of him and sat up, wiping tears away from her face.

“I’m a fucking nut,” she said finally.

John shook his head. “No, but you certainly keep things interesting. Jen, do you want me to get rid of the booze?”

She nodded.

John slid out from under the covers, stretched, and walked across the room to the bureau. He took the bottle from the drawer, and moved to the windows. He slid one open, leaned out, and threw the bottle into the alley. Jen flinched as she heard it shatter on the pavement below. John shut the window, turned back to her, and grinned.

“Gone,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” John sat back down on the bed and met her eyes again. “You’re not nuts, Jen. It’ll get better, trust me.”

“It’s not fair that you get to be all stable and have your shit together and everything. How do you do it?”

John shrugged. “I start by not having a terrible history of sexual assault. My life wasn’t always this together, Jen. Things were bad for a while.”

He glanced at his right arm, and Jen’s eyes followed his, to the mass of scars on his bicep. She knew the origin of one, the most recent, still raised and flushed pink, not yet turned pale like the rest. The others seemed much older.

“You did that to yourself,” Jen said. “You cut yourself up.”

John nodded. “Yeah, and not because it was the cool thing to do, either. When the voices would get bad, before I learned how to filter them out or tone them down most of the time, I’d sit on the side of my bed with a razor, and think about doing my wrists. I wasn’t sleeping much, back then. The voices kept me awake. I was depressed and angry and scared, and I’d think about killing myself. What stopped me was fear.”

“Fear of dying?”

John shook his head. “I was afraid that the voices would follow me when I died.”

Jen ran her fingers along the scars, barely touching them. John watched, his expression slightly amused.

“I cut there because I had to cut somewhere. I had to. Like the way you had to drink. Do you understand?”

Jen nodded. She leaned forward and kissed his arm. John put his hand under her chin and brought her lips to his. He leaned back, lying down again, bringing Jen with him. After a while she broke away and, shivering a little, pulled the covers over them both.

“We’ll get you through this, Jen.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

Jen paused, as if trying to decide whether to believe him. Then she curled up against him, shut her eyes, and said, “okay.”

John reached over and turned off the light.

* * *

“It’s all slums. Look at this; it’s like a fucking rat warren.” Brian set a folder full of papers down on the coffee table. John took it, and flipped through it. Jen craned her neck, looking over his shoulder.

“These buildings should be condemned,” he said at last.

“I’m surprised they’re still standing,” said Jen.

“No kidding. I got those pictures off the net. By the way, mister senior sales associate, if you want to reimburse the poor CD salesman the ten bucks I paid to print that crap out, I wouldn’t complain.”

John handed Brian a ten dollar bill and said “We can’t go here tonight. I may be stupid, but I’m not an idiot. Last thing we need is to get shot by a crack addict while we’re avoiding being electrocuted by the human sparkplug or carved up by Dr. Jackal.”

“This is all still nuts. Just, you know, for the record,” Jen said.

“Duly noted.” John’s voice was dry, but he was smiling.

“I have work tomorrow,” Brian said.

“Me too.”

“Not me!” cried Jen. “I’m going to stay home, sit on John’s computer, and surf for porn.”

“Make sure to save the good stuff,” John said. He turned to Brian. “What about Friday?”

“Friday works. Suzie’s working ten to six, and then she’s going out with her girlfriends for a bachelorette party. I told her I’d probably be over here, hanging out.”

“How come you never bring her around, Brian?” Jen asked.

Brian shrugged. “She’s got a weird schedule, and she’s already got a big group of friends. Plus I think she’s still sort of embarrassed at how young I am.”

“Oh. Well, we’d like to meet her sometime.”

“Okay. We’ll work something out. John, do you think that kid’s sister is still alive?”

John shrugged. “No idea. I hope so. I think having a guard who can shoot lightning out of his hands is probably useful, so I expect so, but you never know. What I don’t get is why he doesn’t just fry Jackal himself, and rescue her. I didn’t have time to pick that out of his brain. Things happened too fast.”

“There’s gotta be a reason,” Jen said. “That motherfucker didn’t hesitate at all to blast you.”

“That’s true. He didn’t seem to give a shit at all about what kind of damage he might do,” Brian said.

John spoke up. “True, but I know enough to know that kid wasn’t Dr. Jackal, and wasn’t working for Dr. Jackal out of choice. He’s doing it because he’s being forced, and he’s not happy about it. That’s good enough for me.”

“Did Dr. Jackal know we were going to be down there, John?” Jen asked. “He can’t just have that kid guarding the subways all day...”

“No, he can’t. I was thinking about that while we were at the hospital. I bet we tripped some kind of alarm. I don’t think this guy’s stupid. I think he’s insane, but that doesn’t mean he’s stupid.”

“Most serial killers are pretty smart. You have to be, to not get caught right away,” Brian said. John nodded.

“Great, so once we track Einstein down, what’s the plan?” Jen asked. “How do we capture him and the... what’d you call him? The human sparkplug?”

“I have something I want to try with you, Jen,” John said.

“Should I leave the room?” Brian asked. “Or maybe get the video camera?”

Jen gave him the finger. John ignored him. “I have something I think might work.”

“And you’d rather test it on me than wait until you’re being zapped again to find out whether you’re right or not.”

“Yes. That would be highly preferable.”

“Fair enough. If you blow up my brain or something, though, I’m coming back to haunt you.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” John said. He stood, crossed to the bookcase -- long since replaced -- and retrieved a couple of paperback novels. He stacked these on the coffee table and sat down next to Jen on the couch.

“Knock the top one off,” he said, closing his eyes.

Jen flicked her finger, and the top book flew backwards, landing on the floor.

“Good,” John said. “Now the second one.”

Another flick. Another flying book.

“Whee...” Jen’s voice was less than enthusiastic. John grinned, but didn’t open his eyes.

“Third book,” he said.

Jen flicked her fingers again. The book jerked, but didn’t fall from the stack.

“Try harder,” John said.

Jen’s brow furrowed with concentrate. The book wiggled, then was still.

“Blow it up, Jen,” John said. His eyes were still closed.

“I’m fucking trying!” she snarled, staring at the book, willing something to happen. “Jesus, this is frustrating!”

“Good,” John said. “Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to let you go.”

Jen took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. “Okay,” she said.

John opened his eyes. “That’s how I deal with the human sparkplug.”

Jen waved her hand at the book. It flew across the room in a shower of pages, twisting and turning, and rebounded off the wall.

“Better?” John asked.

“Better.”

“Good.”

“You sure you can stop him in the heat of the moment, John?” Brian asked.

John glanced up at Brian, his face serious. “I’d better be. I’m going to bet all of our lives on it.”

* * *

Jen lit a cigarette. “We’re never going to find him.”

“Do you date her for the upbeat attitude, John? Because I can see the appeal. Always a positive comment or a friendly smile.”

Jen blew smoke in Brian’s direction. “Look, wolf-boy, I’m just a realist. You want to put a happy spin on things? That’s your problem.”

For John, their back and forth was distant background noise. This had become the standard, really. He had neither the desire nor the ability to exchange

the quick verbal barbs that Brian and Jen seemed to enjoy slinging at each other. Fortunately for him, years of tuning out the voices in his head meant he could tune out more corporeal sounds with equal ease.

At the moment, John was concentrating, using his abilities in a way he had practiced while sitting at home in his building. He could sense the presence of every human within his range, which seemed to be about fifty yards in any direction. He was rapidly moving through these beings, searching their minds, looking for Dr. Jackal or the man they had met in the subway.

“The human sparkplug,” John muttered.

“What, John?” Jen asked, holding up her hand to stop whatever acerbic comment Brian had been about to launch into.

“Nothing,” John said. “They’re not here. Let’s try a block up.”

Jen shrugged. She unscrewed the cap from a bottle of soda, drank from it, and recapped it. “Sure, what the fuck, right?”

Brian laughed. “It’s not just the pleasant attitude, either. It’s the emotional investment in what she’s doing...”

John let them jab at each other, walking slightly ahead, concentrating. He envied Jen and Brian in a way. Their abilities could be turned on and off like a light switch, now that they had gained some level of control. John’s power was always on, and it required tremendous effort to keep from being swamped by voices, particularly when he was actively using his talents.

He was about to ask them to quiet down when he felt the presence flicker across the back of his mind and came to a dead halt. He heard Jen’s feet scrape the pavement as she tried to avoid running into him by sliding to the side. She grabbed his shoulder to steady herself.

“Christ, John, what are...”

John hissed through his teeth. “Quiet. Wait.”

He turned, first to his right, then to his left. Brian and Jen watched, waiting, feeling a sense of frustration not unlike what John had just been

experiencing. They wished they could share in his ability, and better understand what was happening.

“Fuck, we have to move. Now. We’re going to lose him.” John took off down an alley at full speed.

Brian and Jen looked at each other.

“When I pass out, I expect you to carry me,” she said.

“I charge a buck per quarter mile,” Brian replied.

“Just drag me by the feet, then. Let’s fucking go.”

* * *

Behind him, Jen was coughing. Retching. Gasping for air. Even Brian sounded winded. John felt like his lungs had been filled with kerosene and set ablaze. The run had taken them through a twisting maze of back alleys and abandoned buildings, and now at last they had emerged into the modern equivalent of a box canyon. Flanked on all sides by high concrete walls and heaps of refuse, the way in was the only visible way out. At the end of the large space stood their quarry.

“I thought I dealt with you already,” the kid said. “What, you like being electrocuted so much, you came back for more?”

“I know about your sister,” John said.

“Fuck you. You don’t know anything about her, or me.”

“We don’t want to hurt you, Kevin,” John said. The kid jerked, startled, and stared at him.

“How the fuck...” he began.

“Your sister’s name is April. Dr. Jackal has her, but you don’t know where. He’s assured you that if you try to use your powers on him, she’ll starve to death before you could ever find her.”

John took a step forward. Kevin pressed his back up against the wall, holding his hands out. “Don’t make me hurt you again.”

John stopped, and held up his hands. “Okay. I’ll keep my distance for now. All you have to do is answer our questions, Kevin, and you can walk away. We’ll find Jackal, and we’ll stop him, and we’ll save April.”

“I can’t trust you to do that, man.” Kevin was glancing back and forth, eyeing the piles of garbage. One of them looked large enough that he might be able to climb it and reach the hanging ladder of a fire escape.

“Jen, how are you doing?” John asked.

She stepped up beside him, still panting. “I’ll live. I think.”

“Kevin, if you make a break for that fire escape, Jen here is going to have to stop you.”

“I’d like to see her try.”

“No,” said John, “You probably wouldn’t. See, the thing here... Kevin... is that you’re not the only one with interesting talents. If Jen put her mind to it, I’m sure she could knock you off a fire escape.”

“Bullshit.”

Jen took a step forward and flicked her wrist at a pile of trash. It exploded, sending debris skyrocketing into the air.

“Bullshit?” she asked, and smiled. Kevin was staring at her, mouth hanging open. He closed it with an audible snap.

“We’re not here to hurt you, Kevin. We’re here to help you,” John said.

“Fuck you. I don’t need your help. Blow me up if you have to. I’m going to start walking, and in about five steps, I’m going to use *my* special talents, and this time I’m not going to stop with just one of you.”

Kevin took a step forward. Jen began to raise her arm, but John stopped it. Kevin took another step, and a third.

“You must really be some kind of masochist,” he said. He took a fourth step, and paused.

“You’re not going to like this part,” John said.

“I think you’ve got things reversed,” Kevin replied. He took a final step forward and raised his hands. John felt Jen tense beside him, and tightened his grip on her arm, shaking his head.

After a moment, Kevin looked at his hands and then back up at John, and even from a distance of twenty feet, the panic in his eyes was evident.

“Son of a bitch,” he said. “What did you do to me?”

* * *

“Nice place, Kev. Cozy.”

The water-stained walls of the building were crumbling, flaking, sending damp and rotten plaster to the floor. Wallpaper dangled in strips, and the filmy yellow bulbs that hung bare overhead cast a dim, reluctant glow on the few remaining pieces of furniture. Jen was leaning against the door frame, the only thing that seemed strong enough to support her weight. John and Brian were standing inside the room, slightly in front of her.

Kevin was seated across the room, smoking a cigarette and looking troubled. He turned to Jen, and said “You’re not helping your cause here, lady.”

Jen opened her mouth to respond, and John glanced at her. “Jen, please...”

“It stinks in here. I’m going to take a walk,” Jen said. She turned and left.

“You do that,” John muttered. He looked back at Kevin. “Listen, I want you to trust us, so here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you access to your power again. If you try to attack us, I’ll know you’re thinking it as soon as you do.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t,” Kevin said. “You win. You beat me. My sister’s dead. Whatever, man.”

John sighed. “Right. They’re back. Can you feel it?”

Kevin nodded, saying nothing. Small sparks flickered between his fingers.

John waited a moment, then continued. "It doesn't have to work that way, Kevin. We want to help you save April."

"How you gonna do that, man? I don't know where the fuck she is."

"No, but you know where Jackal is."

Kevin shook his head. "No."

"But you could arrange a meeting."

Kevin paused for a moment, thinking. "Yes, maybe. If I had to. What good is that going to do?"

Brian opened his mouth for the first time since their chase had ended in the alley. "Come on, dude... He knows your name. He knows your sister's name. He shut off your powers. Haven't you guessed yet at what he can do?"

"Why don't you add it up for me, genius?" Kevin spat. "I'm not having my best fucking day."

"I'm a telepath," John said, his voice still calm. "At least, I think that's what I am. I read minds, among other things."

"So what?"

"Jesus..." Brian turned, paced a few times, and then stood standing with his arms crossed.

"Relax, Brian," John said. "Keep in mind that he hasn't spent the past eight weeks thinking we're the good guys, like we have."

"Haven't spent eight *minutes* thinking that," Kevin muttered.

"What being a telepath means, Kevin," John said, "is that if you get me within fifty yards or so of Dr. Jackal, I can pull your sister's location from his head."

Kevin glanced at John with new interest. “No bullshit?”

“No bullshit.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair and looked at the two of them with a wary expression. Finally he said, “Okay, you’ve got my interest.”

“I feel so privileged,” Brian said under his breath.

“Ignore him. He just needs someone to bitch at when Jen’s not here.” John was grinning.

Brian rolled his eyes, and said nothing.

“Okay, so you’re a telepath,” Kevin said to John, “And the girl with the attitude blows shit up. What does Brian here do? What makes you ‘special’ like us?”

John and Brian exchanged a glance, and Brian broke into a smile. He laughed a bit, and asked, “Should I show him?”

“I think so,” John said, nodding. “You’ll like this, Kevin. It’s the fucking eighth wonder of the world, trust me.”

Brian pulled off his shirt, shoes, and socks.

“What, he has the power of a male stripper?” Kevin asked.

“Not quite,” Brian said, and triggered his transformation.

It was several minutes before they could convince Kevin to come out from underneath the bed.

* * *

“Oh, this is *bullshit!*”

Jen’s eyes were livid, and John felt a brief moment of concern. She was better than she had once been, but Jen was a long way from calm and in control. He stepped forward and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Can I speak to you in the hall for a moment, Jen?”

“Don’t you fucking take that patronizing tone with me. Don’t act like this is just you *calmin’ down them excitable wimmenfolk*.”

“If the *wimmenfolk* weren’t screaming profanity at me, I’d feel less need to calm them down,” John muttered. Jen glared at him, turned, and stalked into the hall.

When they were alone, John turned to her and said, “What the hell is the problem?”

“He fucking almost *killed* you, that’s the problem. Now you’re best friends and just going to trust him on this shit?”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” Jen hissed. “A misunderstanding is when you think you made a date for Friday and the other person thinks it was Saturday. What he did was attempted manslaughter, not a misunderstanding.”

“Jen, I need you to relax. You’ve been all over the kid since we found him. It’s putting him on edge and pissing him off.”

“Yeah? That’s really sad. My heart bleeds for him. I’ll tell you what, John, it’s only because you’re here that I haven’t blown his goddamn legs off. Every time I look at him all I can think about is when he knocked you off the stairs and I got over there and realized you weren’t breathing. It felt like someone was *stabbing* me.”

“He thought he was defending his sister.”

“Fuck his sister. I don’t know her, and I don’t trust him at all.”

John was quiet for a minute, looking at the floor. He glanced up. “But do you trust me?”

Jen rolled her eyes and blew air upward through her pursed lips. She tried meeting his gaze, couldn’t, and looked instead out a window. Her voice was resigned. “Yes. You know I do.”

“Please, Jen, I need you on board with this. I can’t have you doing it just because you think you have to do what I tell you to. I need you to accept that this kid is telling the truth. He’s not a murderer. He didn’t know he was going to kill me.”

Jen sighed, and nodded, and said “Okay.”

“Jen...”

“I said *okay*, John. Give me a break. I won’t give him any more shit. That doesn’t mean I have to be his friend.”

“No, I suppose not. Fine, Jen.” John turned to go back into the room, and Jen grabbed his hand, pulling him back. She looked up at him.

“I can’t help who I am,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

John looked at her for a moment, trying to stay angry and not able to do it. He smiled, touched her cheek, and said, “I like who you are. I just need your help, okay? I can’t do this by myself.”

Jen leaned forward, standing on tiptoe, and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. “Let’s do this, and go home.”

“Fair enough.”

* * *

Kevin looked warily at Jen as she and John returned to the room. She gave him a cool glance, but said nothing, returning to her position against the door frame.

“Everything worked out?” Brian asked.

“It’s fine,” John said. “You still willing to help us, Kevin?”

“I’ve seen what you guys can do. If anyone has any shot of saving my sister, I’ll take the mind reader, the werewolf, and explode-o-chick over the cops any day. Yeah, I’ll help. I’m telling you though, if you fuck me over and she gets hurt, you’d better be sure I’m dead.”

“We’re not going to fuck anyone over.”

“How the hell did you ever get involved in this?” Brian asked.

Kevin sighed. “My sister and I were living in the subways, with the bums, because we had nowhere else to go.”

Jen made a snorting sound, but said nothing.

“We both have powers,” Kevin continued, “But hers is all fucked up. She gets these flashes when she touches people, where it’s like whatever emotion they’re feeling at the time gets transferred to her... but magnified like crazy. If a person’s a little angry, and she shakes their hand, I’ll have to stop her from starting fights. If a person’s sort of sad, and she bumps them on the subway, it’ll take me hours to get her to stop crying.”

“Sounds like she needs to work on control,” John said.

Kevin nodded. “Yeah, and she was... and she was getting a little better, but it’s hard. We ran away a long time ago, together. Trying to stay alive is hard enough... when you can’t *touch* anyone, it’s next to impossible. I was afraid to leave her alone. I was worried that she would accidentally trip over the feet of some horny old drunk and end up fucking him. Christ, she’s only thirteen!”

“You were in the tunnels and you ran into Jackal?” Brian asked.

Kevin nodded. “She bumped into him because he was standing in the shadows and she didn’t see him. She brushed up against him, and turned to me and started... screaming. It was like, I don’t know, like she was being burned to death or electrocuted or something. Whatever it is that’s in that guy’s head, she didn’t like it at all.”

Kevin’s hands clenched into fists for a moment, before he continued. “I should’ve run with her. If I could go back... if I could do it over again, I’d have grabbed her hand and just run, but I was scared. I’ve never heard her scream like that. Jackal was just standing there, looking at us, watching April scream.

“I didn’t even notice him step up to me, but he clocked me on the back of the head with something. When I woke up, April was gone, but Jackal was still there, sitting on an old piece of concrete, just watching me. He was still in the shadows. I don’t even know what the fucker really looks like.

“That’s not even the end of it, though. I fucked up. I sat up and without even thinking, tried to zap him. My head was still killing me, though, and I screwed it up and missed him. He jumped backward and told me that if I did that again, whether I hit him or not, April would definitely die. After that it was just... pointless. I threatened him a few times and he laughed at me. He has my sister, man; what the fuck was I going to do to him?”

John nodded. “I understand, Kevin. This guy’s crazy, and he needs to be stopped.”

“No argument here.” Kevin lit another cigarette, dragged at it, and looked over at John. “There’s a place I go sometimes to meet with him, just to find out what he wants. Sometimes he gives me money and has me pick things up. I ask him how April is, and he says she’s fine...”

“He could be lying,” Jen said from the doorway. John shot her a glance, and Jen shrugged. “Just saying...”

“If he’s lying, then she’s already dead,” Kevin said. His voice was quiet and so filled with anger that even Jen looked over at him. “If she’s dead, it’s my fault, and I’ll never forgive myself. I want to believe she’s alive, so I believe him when he says she is.”

“Kevin, I...” Jen said, and then stopped, unsure of how to proceed. Finally she continued. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

“Yeah.”

“No, I mean it.”

Kevin glanced at her again, clearly unimpressed. “Yeah.”

Jen rolled her eyes, and returned to staring out the window.

“When can you meet him?” John asked.

“Whenever he calls me,” Kevin said.

* * *

“I think your codename should be ‘Explode-O-Chick’ from now on,” John said.

Jen was kneeling over him, and had been leaning in to kiss him, but instead rested her forehead against his chest and laughed. “Oh, so we have to have codenames, now, since we’re superheroes?” she asked.

“Isn’t that how it works?” John asked. “Also, I think we’re supposed to dress up in tight leather, and be involved in at least three love triangles at any given time.”

“Kinky,” Jen said. She kissed his neck, moving her lips upward to meet his. John kissed back, resting his hands on her hips.

“It’s been six days since we were last really together, like this,” Jen murmured.

“I’ve been trying not to pressure you too much.”

Jen kissed him again. “I can think of a few places where I wouldn’t object to a little pressure,” she said.

John grinned, kissed her, said, “It’s a good thing you’re so open about things, Jen. I have no idea what you’re ready for.”

Jen propped herself up on one elbow next to him. “I don’t know what I’m ready for either, really.”

“That’s why I’m taking it easy.”

“You remember how I said today that I trust you?”

John nodded.

“I meant it, John. I trust you. I know if I say ‘stop’ that you’ll stop. I believe that. I never thought I would... if someone told me this summer that I’d be lying in bed with a guy and saying that to him, I’d have laughed in their face. But here I am.”

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.” Jen leaned forward, rolling on top of John and kissing him again. She reached down and tugged at his t-shirt, pulling it up. John pulled the shirt the rest of the way off. He worked out three times a week, and was in good shape, even with the cigarettes. Jen kissed his abs, his chest, his neck, his lips. She felt an urgency within her that was unfamiliar. This man she was with had almost died, and now here he was, whole and healthy. She wanted him to know how important that was to her.

He kissed back, pulling her shirt out from her jeans, past her shoulders and over her head. Jen tossed it aside. John’s hands moved over her back, down her arms and back, before cupping her breasts. Jen kissed harder, opening her mouth, probing with her tongue, tasting.

John teased her with his fingers, alternating rough and soft. Jen felt dull warmth blooming between her legs and welcomed it. She wanted to know. She wanted to feel. She pressed down, pressed her waist against his, felt him hard through his jeans and shuddered. Here was John, a man like any other, like the man who had brought her so much pain and terror, and yet she loved him. She loved the knowledge that she could excite him like this, but mixed through that love there was still so much fear.

John could sense this, could hear the voices in the background of his mind begin to intensify. He broke away from her lips, kissed her chin, and said, “Easy, Jen.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be sorry. Just take your time.”

Jen smiled, kissed, rubbed herself against him again, finding a rhythm. She’d never felt this before; this heat and damp, these rolling waves of pleasure. John timed the rhythm of his hands to the movement of her hips. Jen lost track of time, lost track of everything except these new sensations. Eventually, she rolled onto her back, pulling John partially on top of her, still kissing.

His right hand left her breast and moved to her hip, then down her leg and over, to her inner thigh. His fingers began tracing their way slowly back upward, and Jen felt a surge of adrenaline. For a moment, the urge to let him continue seemed insurmountable. Then, she reached down and took his hand, stopping him.

“Not yet,” she said.

John stopped kissing and pulled back a little, not upset, but concerned. “Sorry, Jen,” he said. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I...”

Jen put her fingers on his lips to stop him, leaned in and kissed him again, then said. “Don’t be sorry. Soon, John, but not yet. Okay?”

He nodded. Jen pulled herself closer again, this time just lying against him, listening to the sounds of the city in the rain as they entered the apartment, muted by the closed windows and drawn blinds. The patter of rain, the rushing of water, the passage of cars through puddles in the streets.

“Does it feel even better?” she asked after a time. “Does it get even better than... than when I was on top of you?”

“Yes,” John said. He was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, holding her hand in one of his own and using the other to stroke her hair. “Lots better.”

“Lots, huh?” Jen was quiet again for a time, and then she laughed a little. “It feels pretty good already.”

“Yes.”

“John, does it frustrate you that I can’t... that you don’t... get to...” Jen struggled with the words, uncomfortable with what she was trying to ask.

“What?” John asked, “That I don’t get to finish?”

“Yeah.”

John laughed. “A little, sure, but not too much. You don’t get to either, yet. We’ll get there. Actually, all of this kind of reminds me of high school.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Took me almost nine months to get Mary Sampson in bed, making little incremental steps, and even once I did, we had no fucking clue what we were doing.”

“Was she your first?”

“Yeah.”

“How old?”

“Fifteen. Both of us. Too young... but oh well.”

“I’m going to have no clue what I’m doing, either, you know.”

“Oh, I’ll be *more* than happy to give lessons,” John said.

Jen reached down and touched him below his waist, tentative at first, then with growing confidence as she saw her touch have an effect. After a minute, she unbuttoned his jeans and slid the zipper slowly down.

“Start by teaching me how to do this,” she said.

“You don’t have--”

Jen cut him off with a kiss.

* * *

Part 7 -- Glass on the Floor

“We’re dead. We’re dead. We’re dead.” Kevin was exhausted, disheveled, bruised and bleeding.

John grabbed him by the collar, spun him around, and slammed him into the crumbling brick wall. “Why didn’t you fucking tell me he had the place wired?!?” He shouted.

“I didn’t know! How would I *know*?” Kevin shoved John away, coughing. The air was filling rapidly with smoke, thick and black. Something below them was burning. Kevin began to pound against the wooden door, but it wouldn’t budge. The only window in the room had been bricked over some time ago.

“It’s blocked,” John said. “Kevin, cut it out. It’s blocked!”

“We’re going to fucking die!” Kevin shouted at him. “We have to do something!”

John coughed. “I’m working on it.”

“Work faster!”

John shut his eyes and concentrated, searching for other presences in the building. For a moment, there was nothing, and John felt panic clawing at the edges of his mind. He forced himself to breathe, difficult in the smoky air, and try again. This time he found what he was looking for.

“Get away from the door,” he said.

“Fuck you. We have to get out of here.”

“If you don’t get away from the door within about ten seconds, you’re going to be too hurt to do anything except scream. Move, Kevin. Now!”

There was a note of command to John’s voice that cut through Kevin’s hysteria. He looked over at John for a moment, and then did what he was told.

Seconds later, the door exploded with a loud crack, spewing splinters around the room.

“Still alive, John?” shouted Jen’s voice.

“For the time being,” John said. He grabbed Kevin by the shoulder and pulled him toward the exit. “Where’s Brian?”

“Hell if I know,” said Jen. She was bleeding from a cut over her left eyebrow, and was covered in grime, but looked otherwise unharmed.

“We can’t leave without him,” said John.

Brian’s voice came from down the hallway. “Worry less about me and more about your own asses! Head this way. There’s fresh air. I think we can get out.”

John made his way past Jen, and Kevin began to follow. She shot an arm out, blocking his path, and looked into his eyes.

“This is your fault,” she said.

“Right,” Kevin snapped. “I’m the one who jumped out of the shadows and shouted ‘get him!’ to the rest of you. That wasn’t your idiot boyfriend, or anything.”

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Jen said.

“Jesus Christ... we’re going to *die* if we don’t get out of here, you crazy bitch! Get out of my way!”

She moved out of the way. After staring at her for a moment longer, Kevin moved past and headed up the hall after John. Jen followed him. Kevin heard her speak once more, her voice pitched low so that the others wouldn’t hear.

“I know you tried to fuck us, Kevin. As soon as I can prove it, I’m going to have Brian tear your goddamn arms off.”

* * *

Things started off well.

Kevin called them a few days after their initial conversation to say that Dr. Jackal had contacted him and wanted to meet on Friday evening. Brian was scheduled to work, but was able to swap shifts with another employee. Kevin agreed to take them over to the meeting place well in advance, so that they could position themselves.

There was a general sense of excitement as they took the subway across town, to meet with Kevin. Even Jen seemed in a good humor, laughing and trading insults with Brian. Even the delay on the train, sitting in the tunnels under Manhattan, waiting to start moving again, didn't seem to bother her.

"Got to find us a person who can fly," Jen said. "This subway crap is for amateurs."

They were sitting in the last car of the train, in the row of seats that ran along the back. Jen was wedged into the corner, one leg draped over John's. He laughed.

"You say that as if we're not amateurs. So far I've managed to get electrocuted, and then we talked a good kid into helping us. That's not really a fantastic track record."

"Maybe not, but it's more than anyone else has done, unless I've missed the news reports about groups of superheroes flying around in spandex and doing battle."

"I'm not sure we'll meet anyone who can fly," Brian said. "At least, not in the traditional way that superheroes are supposed to."

"Why's that?" John asked.

"Well, I've been thinking about our uh... gifts... and so far they all fall within two basic ranges. You, Jen and Kevin are all manipulating energy, albeit in substantially different ways. I'm manipulating my own physical structure, I guess. I think I actually rapidly generating new cells whenever I change. It's basically a turbo-charged version of the way some people heal more quickly than others."

"So why does any of that prevent the possibility of flying?"

"It doesn't, not really. It just seems unlikely to me that anyone's power is going to make them immune to gravity. If you could manipulate air currents... if

that was your power... then I bet you could fly. If you could grow wings the way I grow fur, then you could probably fly that way too. When Superman flies, though, there's no real reason for it. He just does it, without even waving his arms. That makes no sense. See what I mean?"

"I think so. You're saying that there has to be some physical reason for our powers?"

"More or less, yeah."

"I don't care if it's physical, or mental, or if Jesus is floating above me and giving me the ability to blow things up," Jen said. "We need someone who can fly. This is bullshit."

As if on cue, the subway rumbled back into motion. Jen raised her arms in a *hallelujah* gesture.

"Are we going to be late, John?" Brian asked.

He shook his head. "No. We should still be early, actually. I'd rather get there and wait around, rather than cut it close."

Brian nodded. "Good," he said. "What's the plan?"

John shrugged, grinned, and said, "I have no fucking idea."

* * *

"What's the plan?" Kevin asked when he met them at the subway exit.

"We discussed it a bit on the train," John said. "I really didn't have one, to start out, other than the basics. We need to be close enough to Dr. Jackal that I can read him, but far enough away that he won't realize we're there. Is that possible?"

"He likes to meet in this old, abandoned building. It's one story but I think it has a basement or two. I'm not sure what it used to be. It's... pretty bombed out. There should be plenty of places to hide. It's full of rubble, and has lots of different rooms. And no light. He doesn't like me to see his face."

“Good. That will work fine. We’ll hide. Can you... we need you to not give us away. Will you be too nervous?”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “First off, my sister’s life is on the line. I’ll do whatever it takes. Second, I’m *always* nervous when that fucking guy shows up. He scares the shit out of me. So he shouldn’t notice any difference. How fast can you do this?”

“Pretty fast.”

“Then what?”

“I’m not sure. Once I have the information I need, we should be able to take him pretty easily. Brian, think you can handle backing me up on that?”

“Sure,” said Brian.

“Good. Jen, I’d like you to focus on making sure that if he runs, whatever direction he goes in gets suddenly filled with explosions. That work?”

“I can handle that,” Jen said, her voice subdued. She was still clearly unhappy to be around Kevin, but was doing a better job of controlling her outbursts.

“Kevin, that leaves you. Here’s my promise: If I can’t get anything from him, we won’t do anything. We’ll wait until he leaves, and come out, and try again the next time.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘if I can’t get anything?’ You said you do this all of the time.”

“I do. I’ll get the information I need, trust me. I’m just letting you know that if something totally bizarre happens... something that we can’t predict, I’ll do my best not to increase the danger to you or your sister.”

Kevin mulled this over for a moment and then said, “Okay.”

John turned as he heard the scrape of Jen’s cigarette lighter. “Last one, okay Jen? I don’t want him to smell it.”

“He’s just a *guy* for Christ’s sake,” Jen said.

“He’s got my fucking sister,” Kevin’s voice was low, and he was clearly trying to remain calm. “Could you just play along with this, please, until we have her back? After that, if you want to break both my arms while smoking an entire pack of cigarettes at once, I’ll let you. I don’t give a shit. Just... please do what John says.”

Jen rolled her eyes. She took the cigarette, barely smoked, held it out between two fingers, dropped it to the sidewalk, and ground it out with her foot. Her eyes never left Kevin’s.

“I may take you up on that arm breaking thing,” she said. “Be ready.”

* * *

To John, attempting to read Dr. Jackal’s mind was like fishing with one’s bare hands in a pool full of motor oil. His thoughts were slippery and black, like eels that only come out at night. Being joined with this man’s brain made John feel instantly dirty.

He was crouched in a small room filled with dust and shattered concrete. Jen and Brian were similarly positioned in adjoining areas of the building. There was little light, only the glow from the streetlamps outside, seeping in through the cracks in the boarded windows. John’s knees were stiff. His mouth was dry. Being in contact with this man’s mind, like a roiling pit of snakes, was bringing back the old sensations of nausea and vertigo, making it difficult to concentrate.

This made retrieving the information he needed much more difficult than John had anticipated.

“How are you this evening, Kevin?” Dr. Jackal asked. His voice was smooth and refined, not at all what John had been expecting.

“Okay I guess,” Kevin said, and there was indeed a great deal of nervousness in his voice. Dr. Jackal seemed not to notice, or care.

“Excellent. I have something I need you to take care of for me, Kevin.”

“I want to see April,” Kevin said. This was part of the plan; he would keep the doctor talking for as long as he could without arousing suspicion.

“Demand anything of me again, Kevin, and I will ensure that you never see her again. I will ensure that *she* never sees *anything*, ever again.”

“I’m not demanding, sir. It was a request.” Now Kevin sounded beyond nervous. He sounded terrified. John redoubled his efforts to comb through the man’s mind. Slowly, he was able to begin assembling pieces.

“Your request is denied. I am in need of a bone saw. You will acquire one for me.”

John shuddered. He had almost all of the information he needed. The girl, April, was being held in a room in a house, less than ten blocks away. He just needed the address.

“I don’t have any money,” said Kevin.

John heard the shuffling of paper. “This should suffice.”

“Sir...”

“Doctor.”

“Doctor, when can I see my sister?”

“When I have no further use for you.”

The numbers and street name floated into John’s mind. He severed his connection with Dr. Jackal, happy to be doing so, and tensed for attack.

“I will depart now, Kevin,” Doctor Jackal was saying. “Be here in three days at this time, with the saw. You will stay here for ten minutes after I have left, as always. I will know if you follow me.”

“Okay, I... okay... I won’t follow you.” John could hear Kevin grasping for some way to extend the conversation, and not finding anything. There was a single footstep, and John knew he could wait no longer.

“Get him!” John shouted, and leapt into action, running from his room and directly at the murderer whose back was now turned to Kevin.

Dr. Jackal did not even look behind him at the noise. As soon as John shouted, he was in action. He spun, grabbed Kevin by the shirt, and threw him at John. The two collided and fell sideways into a small room with no windows. Jackal slammed the door shut.

John could hear Brian snarling, and then there was a crashing noise. Brian would later explain that Jackal had sidestepped at the last moment, long after Brian was in mid-air and unable to stop himself. Brian ended up embedded halfway into the plaster of the wall. Before he could dig himself out, and before Jen could do anything to help, Jackal had stepped into another room.

That was when the explosions began.

* * *

“Oh, God, April is so dead,” Kevin moaned. “He’s going to go back to wherever he’s got her, and he’s going to cut her up and eat her. I fucking knew I shouldn’t have done this.”

“Kevin...” John’s voice was tired, but calm.

“No, shut up. You said you’d take care of this. How the fuck do a psychic, a werewolf, and a girl who blows shit up not manage to catch some random guy?!”

“Kevin...”

“I can’t fucking believe this. I can’t believe you let him get away. I did exactly what you told me to do, and your big solution was to jump out and try to bum-rush him.”

They were standing several feet from the abandoned building, which was now very obviously on fire. John knew it was only a matter of time before emergency workers and the fire department would show up.

John shrugged. “I figured you’d get out of the way.”

Kevin threw his hands into the air in disgust, turned, and began to walk away from the group.

“Going somewhere?” John asked.

“I’m going to go get drunk and cry,” Kevin said without looking back.

“Oh. Think you’d rather come save your sister, with us?” John asked.

Kevin stopped, his back still turned. “You know where she is?”

“I do. It’s not far. There may not be a lot of time. Jackal doesn’t know that I have that information, but he knows that you tried to set him up. I don’t know how he’ll react, but I doubt he feels like he has any use for your sister at this point.”

Kevin whirled. “Why didn’t you fucking tell me you knew where she was?!?”

“I was trying to, but you wanted to keep yelling at me.”

Kevin stared at him for a moment, and then said, “Your girlfriend thinks I set you up. She thinks I was trying to get you killed.”

Behind him, John heard Jen mutter a string of profanity.

“My girlfriend is still a bit upset about that time when you almost killed me,” John said.

“I said I was sorry...”

“You didn’t fucking mean it,” Jen snarled, still standing behind John.

“No, I didn’t,” Kevin said. “Why does that mean I set you up?”

“He didn’t set us up,” John said.

“You don’t know that.”

John turned to her with a slight grin and said, “Yes I do, actually.”

“Hey! Stay the hell out of my head!” Kevin cried.

“Sorry. Necessary precaution. If it makes you feel any better, I’ve gotten good enough that I only find the stuff I need. First couple of people I read, I found out *all* sorts of things about them that I really could’ve done without.”

“John, if we’re going to do this, we need to do this,” said Brian. “Kevin or no Kevin.”

“I’m coming,” said Kevin.

“Don’t do us any favors, Kev,” Jen said. Her voice was bitter, but she sounded like she had already accepted his decision.

“She’s my sister. I’m coming.”

“Good,” said John. “Let’s go.”

* * *

He was not sure exactly what he had just seen, but if there was any capacity left for surprise within the man the press called Dr. Jackal, then surely that was what he was now feeling. That the boy, Kevin, had betrayed him was no great shock. Jackal had anticipated it long ago, and planted the bombs in their meeting place for just such an eventuality.

That it would be anyone other than the police that Kevin would work with had not occurred to Dr. Jackal.

That it would be a young man, what appeared to be a werewolf, and at least one other person was something that would never have crossed his mind.

Not that it mattered. Dr. Jackal had registered only passing surprise when he had discovered the abilities that Kevin and his sister possessed. Now that he knew such people existed, he was not startled to discover that there were others. He wondered briefly if the young man who had charged him had any powers.

It didn’t matter. The blast had given Dr. Jackal sufficient time to escape, and he was now several blocks from the area. Jackal traveled using an interconnecting series of alleys, subway tunnels, and surface streets. He traditionally wore a nondescript khaki trench coat and walked with a slouching posture that made getting a good view of his face difficult. Tonight it mattered little. He had seen no one since leaving the burning building.

And now he was home. Here, in his sanctuary, Dr. Jackal was free to let his guard down. Here, in this dilapidated ruin on its overgrown plot of land, there was no one whose eyes need concern him. He could create in peace.

In the rooms down below, Jackal was creating his masterpiece. The rats came there sometimes, and the bugs, but he put out traps for both. It was the smell that brought them.

Jackal hung up his coat and opened the door that lead downstairs. The smell was diminishing now. The piece itself was dry and no longer smelled at all, but the latest components still gave off some odor. Dr. Jackal was reminded that he was still in need of a bone saw. He frowned. The irony would have been delicious, had the boy been the one to deliver it to him. Now he would have to acquire one by some other means.

The piece stood in the center of the room, illuminated by angled, colored bulbs that he had placed into the rafters above. It seemed almost to glow in the light. He had spent hours polishing, placing, considering. Dr. Jackal reached out and ran his finger along a bleached white curve. This section, yes, this had once been a jawbone. The young man with blonde hair, from New Jersey, had donated himself to the cause. The police had found that body decapitated. The rest of the skull was elsewhere, smiling out from the other side of the piece, illuminated by green light.

He had done all he could with full bones. Now he needed a saw. Still, even incomplete, the work was truly a thing of beauty. When it was finished, Jackal was not sure he would ever be able to start a new project. How could one improve upon perfection?

He was admiring the work when he became aware of the presence behind him. Before he could turn, there were words in the air, befouling his sanctuary, filling him with hate and rage and some alien emotion that at last he recognized as fear.

“This is some fucked up, disgusting, demented shit...” the voice was young, and male. The same voice that had shouted “Get him!” earlier that evening. They had tracked him here. How?

Jackal began to turn, felt powerful hands grab his shoulders, and was suddenly freed from the earth’s gravitational pull. He had time to wonder if this newfound ability to fly was temporary, or a power like Kevin’s, when he hit the concrete wall on the far side of the room and slid to the floor, groaning.

“Did you kill him?” Jen asked, her words muffled. She was holding a hand over her mouth and nose, trying not to look at the piece of ‘sculpture’ in the center of the room, trying not to think about where it had come from.

“I fucking hope so,” Brian snarled, his voice raw and guttural from the transformation.

“No,” said John. “He’s alive, and we’re not going to kill him.”

“Not until he tells me what I need to know, anyway,” Kevin said. He moved across the room and stood with his foot on Jackal’s chest. The good doctor looked up at him, wheezing in the powdery dust of the earthen floor. There was blood coming from his nose.

“Where is my sister?” Kevin asked. His voice was calm, but all in the room could hear the raw nerves at its edges.

Jackal said nothing. Kevin leaned down so that his face was inches from Jackal’s.

“Tell me where April is, or I’m going to melt your eyeballs in their sockets. I can do it, you know. I’m really good with my powers. I’ve been using them for six years. I’ll leave you alive, but it’ll hurt so much you’ll beg me to kill you.”

“Kevin...” John began.

“Fuck off!” Kevin shouted. “I don’t care about your plans. Either he tells me where my sister is, or I take his fucking eyes.”

Jackal gurgled laughter, choked on his own blood, and went into a coughing fit. At last it subsided, and he grinned up at Kevin. He pointed across the room, toward a closed door.

“Brian, help me,” Kevin said.

Brian moved over and stood next to Jackal. “Open it,” he said. “This asshole’s not going anywhere.”

Kevin turned and, with some amount of trepidation, crossed the room and stood before the door. He seemed unable to move.

“I’m going to throw up if we don’t get out of here soon,” Jen said, still holding her hand to her face. The others ignored her.

John crossed over and stood behind Kevin. He put a hand on the younger man’s shoulder and in an odd, quiet voice said, “You don’t have to open it, Kev.”

“Like hell I don’t.”

“If there was anyone on the other side of that door, don’t you think I’d know?”

“April?” Kevin asked. Behind him, Jackal laughed again.

“Don’t...” John began.

Kevin shoved John’s hand from his shoulder and brought his hand up slowly, as if fighting rigor mortis. He grasped the doorknob. It turned easily in his hand, making a small clicking noise. With a deep breath, Kevin pushed the door open.

* * *

The body on the floor had been dead for at least two weeks. John had known that there was nothing alive behind the door, had known that there was no one alive in the building apart from his group and Jackal since the moment he had entered the house. If he had believed there was any chance of convincing Kevin not to search for his sister here, he would have done so. John knew there wasn’t, and so had accepted the inevitable. He thought he had prepared himself for this.

Looking now into the room, John realized he had been very wrong.

The corpse was lying on its side near the center of the room, one arm stretched toward the door. Its face was puffed and green and black, turned up, also looking toward the door. Something had eaten the girl’s eyes, nose, and lips. What was left looked like a screaming nightmare.

The body was rail-thin, naked, and tied at the ankle to a bolt in the floor by a strong metal cable. There were lacerations around the ankle and after a moment, John recognized that he was looking at bite marks. He understood, suddenly and completely, that this girl had tried to chew her own foot off in order

to escape from the room she was being held in. She had tried, and failed, and died pulling at the cord, pulling toward the door.

She had died with her hands and knees lacerated from the glinting shards of glass that Jackal had spread liberally around the floor, leaving only a small bare patch in the center. She had died with her hand outstretched, begging for her life, or sustenance, or water. Perhaps at the end she had begged only for death.

These realizations hit John like a physical blow and he took a step backward, saying “Oh, no...”

“John?” Jen asked, starting forward.

“Don’t come over here,” John said, but Jen already had.

“Ohmygod,” she said in a little breathless whisper.

Kevin was standing stiff as a board, saying nothing, staring at the site before him. In the background, Jackal’s coughing chuckle had become outright laughter.

“Guys?” Brian said.

“Stay there. Keep him there,” John said. His voice cracked in the middle of the words.

“April?” Kevin’s voice was quiet, and sounded very young. He took a step forward and John grabbed his shoulder.

“Kevin, don’t. You can’t help her now. This... the police won’t want you in there.”

Kevin turned to face him. “The... police?”

“Yes. We have to get out of here and call the police. This is a crime scene. A huge, huge crime scene.”

Kevin gave an incredulous laugh. “You want me to call the police?!”

“Yes, that’s what I want.”

“My sister is dead.”

“I know she is Kevin, and I’m sorry. Can you keep your shit together?”

“My shit is completely together,” Kevin said. His voice was calm, polite, almost congenial. “I know exactly how this needs to be handled.”

He took a step backward, away from the doorway and out of John’s grip. He glanced again into the room containing the body of his sister, and said “April I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Then he whirled and, screaming, ran at Jackal, electricity arcing in wild patterns from his hands.

* * *

It was Jen who reacted first to Kevin’s attack. Her position, a different angle than John’s, had allowed her to see the change in Kevin’s eyes as he took his final glance at his sister. To Jen, it was as if some fire had suddenly kindled within Kevin, made visible through the windows of his eyes. Even as he was turning and beginning his run, she was already moving to stop him.

But stop him how?

Two steps behind him, Jen realized that she would not catch Kevin before he reached Jackal’s prone form. Brian, in wolf form, might have been able to react with enough speed to prevent it, but he had returned to human form after tossing Jackal across the room. Now he stood, staring in surprise as Kevin crossed the room. Jen realized that to the others in the room, all of this was happening very quickly. To her, everything felt slow and awkward.

She lumbered after Kevin, and became aware that she, too, was shouting. Unlike Kevin, her cries were not a raw sound of rage and hate and pain. They were, instead, words, repeated as she ran, in what she knew was a hopeless plea.

“No, Kevin! Please, Kevin! No!”

If she had possessed more time, Jen might have contemplated her actions and wondered why she cared. Here, now, was a person she disliked, attempting to

murder a person who in all truth deserved nothing more. She might have asked why she was trying to stop Kevin from doing what he intended to do.

There was no time, and Jen was acting on instinct.

Kevin shoved Brian out of the way and fell to his knees, grabbing Jackal by the collar. Electricity crackled from Kevin's eyes, from his mouth, from his shoulders and chest and hands. Jackal's body seized and then his legs began making violent, uncontrolled kicking motions.

I'm going to die, Jen had time to think as she too fell to her knees, skidding on the dirt floor. Behind her John was shouting something, but Jen couldn't understand it. Brian was just beginning to pick himself up from the ground. There was no time to think about anything else.

Jen wrapped her arms around Kevin and pulled him away from Dr. Jackal. There was pain, at first, a jolting, burning sensation that ran through her, but it stopped even before she had landed on her back, holding Kevin atop her.

Jen wrapped her arms around Kevin, holding him as tight as she could, pressing his face into her chest. She heard herself saying, "No, Kevin. You don't want to do this. You don't want to be a murderer. You don't want to be like him. Please don't do this. Please."

Kevin pushed against her for a moment, and Jen cried, "Please!"

A moment more of resistance and then Kevin went limp. Jen heard him, felt him, give one long, wailing cry against her chest. Then there was only the shaking of his body as he sobbed.

* * *

Jen was holding Kevin while he wept. Brian was picking himself off the floor. John was standing by the doorway into the room full of glass and death, still rooted to the spot and unable to move.

Dr. Jackal was twitching, but John thought that maybe he was also breathing. He hoped so. He didn't want Kevin to be a murderer any more than Jen did.

“Jen, are you okay?” He asked, trying to will his legs to move. They seemed uninterested in responding.

“Yeah, I’m fucking peachy,” Jen said. She was still holding Kevin, making shushing noises that John associated strongly with his mother. Men didn’t know how to make those noises, not really. It seemed they were something exclusive to women.

“Brian?”

“Hey, no problem.” Brian laughed. The sound was all nerves, without any humor.

“Is Jackal alive?”

“I think so,” Brian said. He knelt down and felt for a pulse. “Yes. He is.”

“Okay. Stay there and watch him. Jen, can you handle Kevin?”

“He’s not going anywhere, John,” Jen said. “Do whatever it is you need to do so that we can end this and get him the fuck out of here.”

“I’m going to make a phone call. I’ll be right back.”

“Fine.”

“Did he hurt you, Jen?”

“Would you just fucking GO?!” Jen snarled.

John went. Up the stairs and into the kitchen. He checked the phone there, and found no dial tone. He stepped out onto the porch, pulled his cell phone from his pocket, and dialed 911.

“What’s your emergency?” asked a voice.

“I... listen, I have Dr. Jackal. We captured him. My friends and I are at his house.”

“Dr. Jackal...” the voice, a woman, was questioning.

“The guy who’s been slicing people up and eating them for the last few months,” John said. “Come on, don’t you read the papers?”

“The... the killer? You have him?!”

“Yes. We found his house and trapped him. Christ, lady, we need you to send the police.”

The anger in John’s voice seemed to cut through her surprise. She assumed a more business-like tone “Are you sure it’s him?”

“I’m absolutely, one hundred percent positive. There are... things in his basement. Bodies. And uh... pieces.”

“Oh lord,” murmured the woman. “What is your exact location?”

John glanced at the number on the house and gave her the address.

“We’ll send a squad car right away,” the voice told him.

“I’d send more than one, and I’d send them fast,” John said, and hung up.

* * *

In retrospect, it shouldn’t have surprised John that the first news van arrived fully six minutes before the first police officer. At the time, he had not even given the idea a moment’s consideration.

In the moments after he had called the police, John heard a noise behind him and turned to see Jen leading Kevin through the door. His eyes were bloodshot, staring out at the world without seeing. John was reminded of the documentary footage he had seen of shellshocked soldiers from World War II.

“What are you...” he began, and Jen glanced over at him.

“I wanted to get him out of there,” she said.

John nodded. Jen helped Kevin sit down on the stairs of the porch. She dug in her pocket, pulled out a battered pack of cigarettes, lit two, and placed one between Kevin’s lips. After a moment, he dragged at it, reached up, and took it between his fingers.

John watched them. Both were disheveled, covered in dust. Tear tracks shone on Kevin's face, though he was no longer crying. He stared out at the yard, smoking and saying nothing. Some of his hair had pulled away from his ponytail, and Jen reached out to smooth a lock of it away from his eyes, tucking it behind his ear. Kevin flinched, but didn't turn to look at her.

"Did you call the police?" Jen asked, still looking at Kevin.

"Yes."

"They coming?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Where's Brian, Jen?"

"He said he was going to bring that sick, murdering piece of shit upstairs. He didn't want to be down there. None of us did."

"I should go check on him."

"You probably should."

"You going to be okay out here?"

Jen dragged at her cigarette and glanced up at John. "I don't think anything is going to be okay, John. Not tonight. Go check on Brian."

John was about to do so when the first news van pulled into the driveway. Jen looked up at it and unleashed a string of invective that, under other circumstances, even John might have found offensive. At that moment, he couldn't have agreed more.

"They're not coming in here," he said.

"You're goddamn right they're not."

A well-dressed young woman approached them. Two camera men trailed behind her.

“You can’t come in here,” John said to her.

“Are you a police officer?” the woman asked, her tone pleasant.

“No, I’m not.”

“Then you’ve no authority here whatsoever, and no reason to interfere with our operation. Is Dr. Jackal inside?” The woman’s tone was still polite and businesslike.

“I’m not sure you understand the situation,” John said.

“The situation is that you’ve called the police and claimed to have captured a serial killer in this building. We’ll want to interview you, of course, once we’ve finished filming the interior.” The woman took two steps up onto the porch. John blocked her way.

“You’re not going inside.”

The woman cocked her head to the side and gave John a sweet smile. Her eyes were angry, though, and when she spoke, her voice was like ice. “Oh, yes, we are. Move aside. You’re a civilian, and have no authority here.”

There were sirens in the distance now, and another van -- this one from a competing station -- had pulled into the driveway. The woman on the stairs took another step forward. Before John could react, Jen leapt to her feet. She grabbed the newswoman by the collar, and met the woman’s eyes.

“I don’t care about authority. There are people down there who have died, and you’re going to give them the respect they deserve. If you take another step, I’m going to make things very uncomfortable for you.”

“Manny,” the woman said, “Go around to the side entrance, get in, and start filming. Ray, go get Terry from the van to help us deal with this.”

“Manny, Ray, if either of you move, I guarantee you won’t be using your legs for at least six weeks,” Jen said. She glanced over at John, and he understood the look. She didn’t want to have to use her powers. Not in public, not with

another news crew already setting up, preparing to film this assault on their competitors.

“Go,” said the newswoman. Manny, the cameraman in the rear, began to head for the side of the house.

“Do what you have to do, Jen,” John said.

Jen took one hand from the newswoman’s collar and gestured toward the ground near Manny’s feet. It exploded upward in a shower of dirt and pebbles, leaving a hole the size of a basketball, roughly a foot deep, directly in front of him.

“I won’t miss next time, Manny,” Jen said. “Stay there.”

“Que es esto energia malvada?!” cried Manny, but he didn’t move.

“Ray, were you filming that?” The newswoman asked. Her voice was breathless, her eyes wide, staring at Jen.

“No, Kelly, but I am now,” said Ray.

“In a minute, the people from channel nine are going to see that you’ve stopped us here, and are going to go around the side,” Kelly said to Jen. “You’re going to have to do that again, on camera, or you’re going to have to let them go.”

John and Jen exchanged another glance. What was the right choice?

Before either could decide, Brian made the question irrelevant.

* * *

“Ray, *please* tell me you got that!” Kelly was shrieking in excitement and terror, her professional demeanor left entirely aside. John and Jen were staring at what once had been a bay window, its glass panes long since broken and boarded over. Now it was a splintered ruin. Amidst the dust and wood chips they could make out two forms. The first belonged to Dr. Jackal. The second was huge, and black, and hairy. Brian.

He glanced up at John and said in his guttural voice, “He tried to make a run for it.”

“So you tackled him through a window?” John asked.

“I got a little overzealous.”

“We’re so fucked,” Jen muttered.

Brian glanced at her, then at Kelly, then at the four cameras that were now pointed directly at him.

“Oh, crap,” he said.

In a moment, Brian was human again. The newswoman was screaming “Film it! Film it! For Christ’s sake we’re going to win a fucking *Pulitzer!*”

“I’m getting it all, Kelly!” shouted Ray.

“Shut up,” Kevin said. He was still sitting on the stairs, lost in the confusion.

“Ray, Manny, keep filming! Terry! Teerrryyyy get out here!”

Kevin stood and touched Jen’s hand, removing it from Kelly’s collar. He took Kelly’s face in his hands, and turned her to look into his eyes.

“Kelly,” he said, his voice low and calm. “Shut up.”

There was a buzzing noise. Kelly’s feet drummed for a moment on the floor and her eyes rolled up in their sockets. Kevin let her slump to the ground. Manny shouted her name, but made no attempt to move. Everyone seemed rooted in place.

“Jesus, Kevin, did you kill her?” Jen asked.

“No,” Kevin said. “But I didn’t worry too much about how bad a headache she’s going to have, either.”

He turned to face the group of people on the lawn. There were now four news vans. Multiple anchorpersons, cameramen, technical assistants, and a number of others were standing on the lawn. None were moving. The first police car was moving down the streets, its flashing lights clearly visible, siren still wailing.

“Listen up,” Kevin snarled at the group. “Anyone not wearing a badge and a uniform tries to walk into this house, from any entrance, and I will kill them. You know what happens when you stumble into a high voltage transformer? First your internal organs start to burn. Then your hair catches fire. Then your eyes blow out of their fucking sockets. I’ll do that to each of you, because right now I don’t care. The only life that meant a goddamn thing to me is gone. I’ll do it to each of you, and then I’ll go to your homes, and I’ll do it to your husbands and wives. Your kids. Your pets. I have nothing to live for and I do. Not. Care.”

There was silence. The police car had pulled up, and the siren had been cut out. An officer was getting out of the car.

“Comprende?” Kevin asked.

“Jesús, por favor... me rescata de esta pesadilla,” moaned Manny. He was fingering a gold cross that hung around his neck.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Kevin said.

* * *

Part 8 -- Unraveling

It was near three in the morning before the police released them, after multiple rounds of questioning. These meetings had culminated in Jen shouting “you can’t arrest us because people think our friend is a werewolf,” which, as it turned out, was the truth. The police had assured them that more questioning would be coming, and John said he understood.

“It’s not every day that a group of random people catch a serial killer,” he had told the Sergeant on duty, who had agreed.

When they walked through the doors of the police station, the crowd was several hundred feet deep. There was a roaring noise, the combination of shouts and cheers, cries of anger, cries of support. Cameramen, anchorpersons with microphones, and assorted other members of the media surged forward.

“Inside,” John said to his friends, and they stepped back into the building.

“What do we do now?” Brian asked.

“I’m open to suggestions,” John said.

“The news is out,” Jen said. “Brian’s a werewolf, and I blow shit up, and Kevin electrocutes people. It’s on tape, for Christ’s sake. We’re screwed.”

“Not if they can’t find us,” John said.

“You weren’t listening carefully,” Brian said. “I heard you name, and mine, and Jen’s. I’m sure they’re working on Kevin.”

Jen put her hand on her forehead and sighed. “Fuck, if they know who I am, I might as well stay here. I’m going to end up arrested anyway.”

“Why?” Brian asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“They’ll figure out who I am soon enough,” Kevin said. He was leaning against a wall, staring out at nothing. “Someone will leak April’s name. Probably it’s already happened.”

“You need to get some sleep,” Jen said to him.

“I need a half a bottle of valium and a quart of vodka,” Kevin replied, not looking at her.

“That would kill you,” Brian said. Kevin didn’t bother to acknowledge him. He looked like he was trying to keep from crying again.

Jen crossed the hall and hugged Kevin. He stood stiff for a moment and then hugged back, putting his head against her shoulder and drawing in a ragged breath.

“Do you need someplace to stay, Kev?” she asked.

He nodded into her shoulder.

“John, can we get them to call us a cab maybe? If we can get to your apartment, we can at least keep them out of there, can’t we?”

“Like we kept them out of Jackal’s house?” John asked.

Jen rolled her eyes. “If necessary.”

“I’ll check,” Brian said. He headed toward the reception desk.

“This is going to suck,” John said.

Jen nodded. She let go of Kevin, held him at arm’s length and asked, “Are you okay?”

Kevin shook his head, shrugged, looked at the floor. “Whatever.”

Brian returned. “Cab’s coming. The girl at the desk said we could have it meet us out back. I’m going to have him drop me at the hospital. Susie’s shift gets over in about twenty minutes anyway.”

“Okay, Brian. Thanks,” John said.

Brian shrugged. “Temporary solution. We’re going to have to deal with the press eventually.”

“Not tonight,” said Jen.

“No,” John agreed. “Not tonight.”

* * *

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

Jen turned, glanced at John, shrugged and smiled a little. “He’s a kid. He’s going through some shit that most people can’t understand. I can’t even understand it, but I know what it’s like to have your entire life just totally fucked. I feel bad for him, John. He’s never going to be the same.”

Kevin was asleep on John’s couch, restless under the blankets even under a double-dose of sleeping pills. He made an occasional noise, and had already wept once without waking up. Sometimes he said his sister’s name. Jen was sitting on the floor, leaning against the edge of the couch, watching Kevin. Periodically when it was obvious that he was in distress, she would run a hand over his hair and make shushing noises. It seemed to work.

“Nothing is ever going to be the same,” said John. His voice was tired and resigned. He flopped down next to Jen. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“No,” she said.

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” John said.

“Me either.”

“You can’t... you can’t stop seeing it, can you?”

“No. Every time I shut my eyes, she’s there. Jesus, John, something *ate her face*.”

“I know. I was expecting it to be bad, Jen. I could deal with that... thing. The ‘sculpture.’ I was expecting something like that. But the girl... I really thought she was alive.”

“So did I.”

“So did Kevin.” John frowned. He took Jen’s hand and kissed it.

“Poor kid,” Jen said.

“He’s going to need our help. Can you... are you over what he did to me?”

Jen nodded. “I never really got it, you know? It wasn’t until I saw her in there, in that room. I saw her and I thought about what it’d be like for me if it was Timmy in there, my brother. If I were Kevin, John, I wouldn’t have stopped. Not for anyone. Not even for you. I’d have killed Jackal, and anyone who got in my way.”

“But he stopped when you grabbed him.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a kid, and because it’s hard to kill someone. It’s hard to do it the first time, John, but that’s why I know I’d have done it. I’ve already done the worst.”

John was quiet, considering this.

“They’re going to arrest me, you know,” Jen said. Her voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

“Why?”

“Because I killed a man, and now that they’ve got witnesses telling them that I can blow holes in the ground with my mind, they’re going to put it together. They’re going to realize I did it.”

“You had reason.”

Jen clenched at his hand, and when she spoke next, there was a raw emotion that John could not at first place. “They don’t know that. John, it’s not like they can test me now and find his DNA inside of me.”

“It’ll be okay, Jen.”

“They’re going to take me away and lock me up somewhere. They’re going to take me away from you.”

John recognized the emotion, now. Jen was terrified. Her breathing was ragged, and her grip on his hand had grown painful.

“Jen,” he said. “Stop.”

She turned to look at him and, with a visible effort, forced her breathing to slow. John touched her face.

“I won’t let them take you away,” he said.

Jen’s lip trembled for a moment, and then she leaned forward and kissed him hard, not like her normal kisses. There was urgency here, a sense of desperation that the kiss was able to communicate in a way that words could not. At last, she broke away, and John realized she was crying.

“There’s so much that’s horrible and evil and ugly in the world, John.” She said. “I’m so scared.”

John nodded. “There’s a lot that’s beautiful, though.”

Jen took his hand and, with some trepidation, placed it at the intersection of her thighs. She looked up at him and said, “Will you show me something beautiful, then?”

* * *

John kissed her abdomen just below the navel, and Jen felt his hands unbutton her jeans. She was shaking, terrified and aroused and excited, and John seemed to sense this. He was moving slowly, being even more gentle than she had come to expect. His kisses, his touches; in every way John told her. He understood that no matter how much she loved him, no matter how much he reassured her, there was no way that she could not be afraid.

“What about Kevin?” She had asked him as they moved toward the bed. “Maybe we should wait.”

“I’ll know if he’s waking up before he does,” John said. “With the amount of Ambien he’s got in him, I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

That was enough for Jen. Despite what John had told her, she knew there was every chance that tomorrow the police would come for her and take her from him. This was something she needed to share with John before that happened.

There was kissing, and touching, and John taking off her shirt and his own, and the warm, wet pad of his tongue on her nipples. Every stroke brought pleasure, and warmth, and a damp throb within her that cried out for satisfaction. Jen unbuttoned his pants, and thought back to the other night, and the things that John had helped to teach her. It had started with quiet murmuring and a sense of uncertainty, and ended with sticky warmth and an unexpected feeling of satisfaction.

Jen doubted she had given John the best night of his life, but she knew at least she had brought him pleasure, and that had made her feel better than she had once ever thought possible. Lying with him after, she had wanted so badly to learn more, to be together with him physically in the same way that she felt mentally. The fear was still too great, then. It was overshadowed now by the fear of what the morning might bring.

Now she was naked, the air of John's apartment cool against her skin, his lips hot against her inner thigh. Jen gasped at the contact, opening her legs as much from instinct as conscious thought. John let his lips trail upward. When they touched her vulva, Jen jerked, not from fear or even excitement, but simply the newness of the sensation.

John's tongue probed, exploring, and brushed over the sensitive nub of flesh that Jen had forever been afraid to experiment with. The result was electric, an arc of pleasure that seemed to ripple through her body. Jen arched, gasped again, and made an involuntary noise. "Ah. Jesus..."

"Okay, Jen?" John asked.

Trying to catch her breath, Jen said, "Better than 'okay' I think."

John laughed a little, and kissed his way upward, along her belly, to her breasts, and eventually her neck. Slightly disappointed, Jen said, "I was sort of hoping you'd... take a longer trip to the south."

John grinned. "I'm planning another visit soon," he said, and kissed her. Jen could taste a slight hint of herself on his lips, and was surprised by the

excitement this brought her. She could feel the heat of him through his boxer shorts, against her leg, and wanted the cloth gone. She reached down and slid them from his hips. In a moment, John was naked in bed next to her.

She broke away from his lips after a moment and said “John, you can... if you want.”

He smiled. “I do, and I will, tonight... if you’re really ready. But not yet. There are other things I want to show you first.”

“Like what?”

John kissed her again. His right hand slid up her thigh and cupped her for a moment. Then he slid two fingers slowly inside of her. Jen felt her body envelope them and wondered at how these things which she had for so long associated with pain and hate and guilt could feel so good.

When John took these fingers, now slick and warm, placed them on either side of her clitoris, and began to rub in long, slow strokes, Jen felt her hips surge forward, heard herself make another noise. The fire that had seemed to burn inside her now seemed tiny and distant compared to the heat that this new touch had awakened, and Jen kissed hard at his lips, brutal and clumsy in her excitement.

With his left hand, John touched her cheek, very lightly, but enough to communicate his message. Slow down. Relax. Enjoy. Jen kissed his neck, closed her eyes, breathed. John’s fingers continued their slow, steady motion. For an instant, Jen felt bright hatred for her uncle, for taking this away from her for so long.

Then it was gone, washed away by pleasure and warmth and an understanding that she could say it now, could have said it from the moment he had returned to her in the subway, and it would have been the truth. More, she understood that there was nothing ugly or frightening about this truth.

“John, I love you,” she told him in a whisper.

* * *

John’s face lit up. He kissed between her eyes, and said, “Jen, do you mean that? You don’t have to say that if you don’t want to. I was going to keep going.”

Jen shook her head, gasped again as John increased the pressure of his fingers, and said, "If you think I don't mean it, stop right now and I'll still say it."

"I know. I don't need to stop."

Jen took a deep, shuddery breath. "Good. Don't."

John instead pressed harder and increased the speed of his movement. Jen pressed her lips against his shoulder and moaned, muffling the sound, still conscious of Kevin's inert form on the couch. She was aware now that her body was building toward some peak, the climax she had read about but never experienced.

Nipples hard and tight, sweat beading on her skin, the folds of her labia hot and wet and sensitive. Jen rocked her hips against the motion of John's hand, alternating between kissing him and making noises of pleasure into the hollow between his neck and shoulder. Thoughts of her uncle were gone from her mind. There was only John and the hot, sweet friction he was making against her.

Jen understood suddenly the desire for sex, in a way that she had never known before. Gone was the academic understanding of wanting to give and receive pleasure. It was replaced with a raw, animalistic physical desire. She wanted him inside her. She wanted to know that he was feeling these things with her.

She tried to tell him this but as she opened her mouth to do so, John increased pressure again, increased speed again, narrowed the distance between his fingers and caught her clitoris between them. Jen's entire body jerked and she clutched at him. The noises she was making against his skin were now no longer moans but short, sharp cries.

In a moment more, Jen's body clenched, and a wave of pleasure rolled through her, unlike anything she had anticipated. She gasped for breath, clenched again, and had to work not to bite into the flesh of John's shoulder. When she thought it was over, John pressed one last time and there was another spasm, this one weaker, but still wonderful.

Jen felt hot and shaky and hypersensitive. John seemed to anticipate this. He took his damp fingers away from the wet folds of flesh and traced small

patterns in the wispy tufts of blonde hair below her bellybutton. He said nothing, letting Jen lean against him and pant.

When she felt she could move again, Jen put her hands in his hair and kissed him, long and deep. At last she pulled away, and looked in his eyes, and smiled.

“Okay?” John asked.

“If I’d have known it was going to be like *that*, I wouldn’t have stopped you the other night,” Jen said.

“The real fun part is experimenting to figure out what you like the best.”

“I’m looking forward to it. But right now...” Jen stopped, biting her lip. Was this too aggressive?

“You can say what you want to say, Jen.”

“I want you to be inside of me. Not your fingers, but your... I want you to finish inside of me. I don’t care if I do, again, or not, I just... that’s what I want. Will you show me?”

John reached across her, to the nightstand, and opened a drawer. There were condoms in there, Jen knew. She had stumbled across them while exploring John’s apartment, and had fantasized at the time that they might someday use them together. Now she felt a thrill run through her. She was still scared. This, really, was the part she was familiar with. This was the part that had hurt.

“As slow as you want, Jen,” John said to her.

“Are you reading my mind?”

He shook his head. “No. You’re throwing off emotions like crazy. That’s always been one of my favorite parts about sex. Being a telepath makes it very interesting.”

“I’m scared, John, but I know what I want.”

John put the condom in her hand and said “Take what you want.”

She put it on him, with his help, and kept her eyes open when he rolled above her. She wanted to see that it was him, and not her uncle. John seemed to understand this. He kissed her once just below the neck, and then again on the lips. He didn't ask her if she was okay. Instead he took her hand, brought it down to their waists, and let her guide him.

She froze for a moment as he entered her, but this feeling was so unlike that which she had experienced before. There it had been dry, and painful, and humiliating. Here it was damp, and hot, and she wanted it so very much. Jen relaxed, and feeling that, John smiled, and kissed her again, and began to move within her.

They thrust against each other, kissing, sighing, and Jen did climax again. Not as strong as before, but sweet and somehow deeper. Her body seemed to take John and pull him into her, and she traced her fingers against his back like he had done to her so many times. John thrust once more, twice, and then his muscles tensed as well. Jen held him against her with her legs, put her hand on his neck and said in his ear, "I love you."

In a moment more, John was lying against her, his lips at her ear, and he said, "I love you too."

* * *

The morning began with chaos.

The knock at the door brought Kevin screaming out of the thin sleep that had lasted through the night. He rolled off the couch, cracking his head against the coffee table and falling to the floor, clutching his face and crying out his sister's name. Jen was up, out of bed, and halfway across the room before remembering that she was nude. She changed directions and headed into the bathroom.

John reached down, found their clothes at the side of the bed, and tossed Jen's into the bathroom. He pulled on his boxer shorts and a pair of jeans, as whoever was outside hit the door twice, hard and urgent.

"Take care of Kevin," John said as he passed the bathroom. Jen was pulling on her panties. "I'll deal with whoever's at the door."

Kevin was still lying on the floor, now just sobbing miserably. John moved past him. The hammering on the door was now steady and insistent.

“I’m coming!” John shouted. “Jesus.”

“Not fast enough.” Brian’s voice, angry and loud, shouted back through the door. “I’m going to fucking kill these people.”

John opened the door and Brian shoved past him, carrying a suitcase. Behind him there was a crowd of reporters, cameramen, and others. John was momentarily blinded by flashbulbs. He slammed the door shut, reconsidered, opened it back up and shouted at the crowd, “First person who knocks or touches that doorbell gets shocked to death. Try me and see if I’m kidding.”

He closed the door again and waited a moment to see if anyone would call the bluff. No one did. He turned his back to the door and surveyed the scene. Jen, wearing a pair of jeans and an inside-out t-shirt, was holding Kevin against her. He had stopped making noise but was still visibly sobbing. Brian was sitting in the easy chair, eyes closed, head leaning back. He looked pale and angry.

“What’s the deal, Brian?” John asked.

“Suzie threw me out of the fucking apartment last night,” he said, not opening his eyes. “I spent the night at a hotel.”

“What? Why?” Jen asked from the floor. Kevin had bled on her shirt, but she didn’t seem to care.

“Why? Because I’m a freak. She wouldn’t talk to me at all on the way home from the hospital. As soon as she closed the door to her apartment, she started screaming at me. ‘I thought you were normal. I can’t believe you’d do this to me. What were you expecting, that I was just going to settle down and have a few *puppies* with you?’” Brian’s voice did a remarkable job of conveying disgust, though whether it was Susannah’s, or his own self-loathing, was hard to tell.

“Ah, Christ,” John said. He flopped down on the couch.

“Maybe she just needs some time to cool down,” Jen said. She helped Kevin up onto the couch and then headed to the bathroom to find first-aid supplies. “John, there’s blood on your carpet. Sorry.”

“Whatever,” John said.

“She’s not going to cool down,” Brian said. “She told me she never wanted to see me again, and that if I even came near her she’d call the police. She called me a freak, and an animal, and a monster, and about a million other things. She kept saying about how she was going to have to go get tested, like I’m full of disease or something.”

“Brian, I’m sorry,” Jen said, returning to the room. She blotted at the split along Kevin’s brow with a damp cloth, dried it, and then taped a pad of gauze over it.

“Thanks,” said Kevin. His voice was hoarse.

“S’okay. You want a cigarette?”

He shook his head.

“I’m sorry too,” said Brian. “This is the same girl that two weeks ago told me she didn’t care that I was so young, that she’d finally found the man she wanted to spend her life with, that she loved me with all her heart...”

“Brian, stop,” Jen said. She could hear the waver in his voice. Brian closed his eyes again, leaned back against the chair, took in a deep breath.

There was a moment of quiet, and then John broke the silence.

“This is my fault,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

* * *

“What’s your fault, John?” Jen asked.

“Kevin’s sister is gone. Brian’s girlfriend hates him. You’re probably going to have trouble with the cops. I was the one with the normal, stable life to start with. I was the one who went ‘hey, let’s be superheroes’ and dragged all of you into this. Why am I the only one getting off unpunished?”

“It’d be really convenient to blame you for all of that...” Brian began.

“... but like none of it is actually your fault,” Kevin finished. Brian and Jen nodded in agreement.

“How do you figure?” John asked.

“My sister...” Kevin swallowed, and there was an audible clicking noise. “April had been dead for almost three weeks. That’s what the coroner told me. She was dead before I ever met any of you.”

“My trouble with the police has nothing to do with this,” Jen said.

“And I would’ve had to tell Suzie *eventually*,” said Brian.

“Doesn’t change that all of you are in the position you are now because of me,” John replied. “At least Brian and Jen... you guys were doing okay, the last few months.”

“We’ll get back to doing okay,” Jen said, trying to sound convincing.

“Life goes on, blah blah blah,” said Brian.

“It’s a little crowded, but you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to, Brian,” John said.

“We’ll see. I’m going to get a hotel room tonight. I’ve got some cash saved up.” Brian ran a hand through his hair, yawned, and sighed.

“Did you end up sleeping with her, Brian?” Jen asked.

“Of course I did. I thought I loved her. I *do* love her.”

“Love is just life lining you up to kick you in the balls,” Kevin muttered.

“I don’t believe that,” Jen said, glancing at John.

Brian caught the glance and shrugged. “Sure. He’s a freak, you’re a freak. Oh, happy day.”

“We’re all freaks,” Kevin said. He took one of Jen’s cigarettes from the pack on the coffee table and lit it. “There are more of us. Find one of them.”

* * *

“I don’t want to find one of them,” Brian said. “I already have someone.”

“Had,” Kevin corrected.

“Fuck off.”

Kevin raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

“I’m making coffee,” Jen announced. “Who’s in?”

Everyone in the room indicated that they’d like a cup. Jen moved over to the kitchen area of John’s apartment.

“How are you sure there are more, Kevin?” John asked.

“Come on... you think the four of us are it? We’re the only four people in the world that can do this shit, and we just all happen to have ended up here in New York?”

John shook his head. “No, you’re right, that doesn’t make sense, but... why have we never heard about it? Why are we the first people ever to end up on television, turning into werewolves and shocking people and such?”

“I have no idea. Maybe most of them are like how me and Jen and Brian were... living in the subways, trying to hide from the world.”

“Maybe they just weren’t stupid enough to try and be heroes,” John muttered. He was lying with his head back on the couch, eyes closed. Brian saw Jen look up from the kitchen with a sad, frustrated look on her face. She stared at John for a moment, then returned to putting coffee grounds into the machine.

“You were trying to do some good, John. You *did* do some good,” Brian said. “Who knows how many more people that twisted fuck would’ve... sorry, Kevin, I shouldn’t talk about it.”

Kevin shrugged, not seeming to know how to respond.

“Yeah,” John said, but his voice was less than enthusiastic. “Who knows? I’m just sorry that it ended the way it did. Nothing went right, after the explosion.”

Kevin surprised them all by snorting laughter. “Yeah, right up to the part where shit started blowing up, everything was fucking peachy.”

“Now we’re going to have reporters following us all day, every day,” John said. “They’ll be waiting for Brian to turn into a wolf, or for Jen to blow something up, or whatever.”

As if on cue, there was a hard rapping at John’s door. He rolled his eyes, stood up, and crossed the apartment. Without looking through the peep hole, he shouted “I told you all to fuck off!”

The voice that came back through the door was male, older, and spoke in a more businesslike tone than John had expected. “I assure you; you told me no such thing. My name is Richard Starkings. I am not with the media.”

“Who are you with?”

“The FBI.”

John glanced briefly over at the others, then looked through the peep hole. Outside was a stocky man, perhaps sixty years old, with short grey hair, wearing a cheap suit.

“Prove it,” said John.

The man held an ID badge up to the door. If it was not real, it was one of the most convincing fakes John had ever seen.

“If you require that I come back with a warrant, Mr. Storm, I will... but I’m hoping to make this visit more pleasant than that.”

John hesitated only a moment. Then he turned to Jen and said, “Hope you made enough coffee for five,” and opened the door.

* * *

“This is good,” Starkings said after a few sips from the mug Jen had handed to him.

“Thank you,” she said. “John buys it at the shop down the street. I just, you know... follow the instructions for the machine.”

Starkings smiled, took another sip, and then looked at them. He was sitting in the easy chair, turned to face toward them. Brian and Kevin were on the couch. John was sitting on the end table, leaning against the wall, legs crossed. Jen was on the floor, and her head rested against John’s crossed ankles.

“You’re waiting for me to tell you why I’m here,” Starkings said.

“I could find out, but it’s more polite to let you tell us,” John said.

“Ah, so you’re a telepath, then.”

“Yes,” John said. There was no sense in hiding it.

“Well, that explains a lot.”

Starkings smiled, drank, and looked at them.

“Start,” John said after a moment, and the FBI agent’s smile became a grin.

“Okay,” he said and, pointing at Brian, he began. “You’re Brian Thompson, only son of Reggie and Miribeth Thompson, of Framingham Massachusetts. You dropped out of a promising high school career and ran away at age 17, for no discernable reason. Now, thanks to the good people at, well... just about every news station in the country, we know the reason.”

Brian grimaced, but said nothing. Starkings went on.

“Do you turn into anything else?”

“Other than a giant, talking werewolf? No.”

“Then you are what we call a bimorph. You have two forms. If you cut yourself shaving, and then transform, and then return to normal, is the cut gone?”

Brian nodded.

“You are a generative bimorph, then, rather than a manipulative bimorph.”

"I'm sure you can sleep easy now, Brian," Jen said.

Brian rolled his eyes. "I'm guessing," He said, "That a manipulative bimorph can only change around his body's molecules, not rapidly grow new ones. So like whatever they change into, it has to be the same mass and weight."

"That is correct," said Starkings. "You're a smart young man."

"So you have a whole classification system?" John asked.

Starkings nodded. "Bimorphs, polymorphs, omnimorphs... although those are theoretical. We've never encountered one."

John was silent, considering this. Starkings continued, pointing at Kevin.

"Your name is Kevin Newbury, named by the state, as was your sister April, now deceased... my condolences. Parents unknown. You ran away from your foster home, with your sister, approximately eighteen months ago."

"Yeah, because they..."

Starkings held his hand up. "We know. They're in jail now."

"Good," Kevin said. "Fuckers."

"Indeed. You can both generate and control electricity, and judging by what you did to the young woman from channel six, I'd say you've been practicing for quite some time."

"Six years," Kevin said.

"Interesting. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Most children don't manifest that young."

"I've been immune to shocks since I was born. I didn't figure out how to control it until I was nine though."

Starkings nodded. He glanced at Jen. "And now, possibly the most interesting member of the group... You're Jennifer Wilkens. Daughter of Henry and sister of Timothy. Your mother, Sarah, died when you and Timothy were two years old. You went missing at the same time that your uncle... died... and were presumed dead. Obviously, you are not."

"No," Jen said.

"You're now wanted for questioning in regard to the death of Jakob Wilkins, Jennifer."

* * *

Jen went first white and then an ugly grey. She put her hand against the floor and breathed deeply.

"You okay, Jen?" John asked her.

Jen shook her head. "Not really, no."

"Take three deep breaths and tilt your head down," Starkings advised. Jen did as she was told, and some color returned to her face.

"Sorry. I thought I was going to pass out."

"You think we're going to throw you in Jail, I imagine," Starkings said.

"Why would I think that?" Jen asked, trying not to sound guilty. To her own ears, she was doing an exceptionally poor job of it.

Starkings gave her a cool grin and sipped at his coffee, then said. "Your uncle was found in your room, his bones crushed, partially dismembered from the impact of his body against the wall. Quite a mystery, until the testimony from one mister Manny Ramirez from channel six news, in which he details how you blew a hole in the ground by pointing at it."

Jen put her face in her hands and shuddered. Brian and Kevin were looking at her with curiosity. John touched her hair, and she grabbed at his hand, squeezing it.

“Forensics was still able to do a thorough examination, and we learned a good deal about the events preceding his death. Jennifer, now that we know what you can do, we know what you did to him. We already knew what he was doing to you.” Starkings said. His voice was gentle.

Jen made a coughing, crying noise. She let go of John’s hand and curled up on the floor, shaking. John slid off the table and sat down. He took Jen in his arms, pulled her against him, and held her there. Jen’s quiet weeping was the only noise in the room for a time.

At last, Starkings said, “I’m sorry, Jennifer. I’m sure it must have been awful.”

“Why don’t we move on,” John said. Jen was still crying against his chest. “Tell me my life story.”

Starkings nodded. “You’re Johnathan Storm, son of William and Theresa, divorced. William lives in Brooklyn. Theresa lives upstate. Your older brother Alex spent time in the Marine Corps. You work as an electronics salesperson and recently you’ve been making an incredible living doing so. If you continue at the rate you’ve been selling for the past month, your income this year will near one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

Brian choked on his coffee and stared at John, who shrugged.

“Do you force them to buy?” Starkings asked.

“No,” John said. “I’ve never forced anyone to buy anything. I just... know what they want, and how to sell it to them.”

Starkings said, “You didn’t feel good about that, did you?”

“No,” said John.

“Good. Nearly all of our telepaths who have that sort of instinctive morality turn out to be very valuable.”

* * *

There was quiet again, as they digested Starkings’ last statement. Jen had stopped weeping, but was still clutching John tightly. He wondered if she had

been crying from fear, or sorrow, or simply relief that the secret was out and there appeared to be no immediate threat of jail.

Finally John said, "So you have others like us working for you?"

Starkings nodded. "Every major government on this planet has had a department of paranormal studies for decades."

"And no one knows about this?"

"I wouldn't say that... there are always rumors, conspiracy theories, that sort of thing. It's difficult to prove. There are many, many layers of red tape."

"You're not from the FBI," John said.

"No. It's just the most convenient government body to use. I could say CIA, but that typically scares people. My department doesn't have a name -- at least, not one I can give to the public."

"Are you... one of us?" Brian asked.

Starkings grinned. "No, I've no powers of my own. Just training. Your friend here, for example, might find my mind surprisingly difficult to read."

"Are you here to offer us a job with your covert group?" John asked.

Starkings tilted his head. "Would you take it, if I did?"

"No," John said.

"What if I told you that I could make all of these troubles disappear? No more media circus, no legal difficulties for Jen, no forced return to state care for Kevin. I could even convince Brian's parents that the boy they saw on the news wasn't their own."

John was silent. Jen looked up from his chest, rubbed at her eyes, and said, "No."

"You want to go on trial for a five year old murder, Jennifer?" Starkings asked.

“If I have to go to jail, then so be it. I’m not bargaining with the government for my freedom,” Jen said.

“If my parents will accept me for what I am, I’d really like to see them,” said Brian. “So your offer doesn’t do much for me.”

“If you put me back in a state home, I’ll be gone in two weeks anyway,” Kevin said.

“We can deal with the media,” John said. “That all you’ve got to offer, Starkings?”

Starkings’ grin broadened and he laughed. “Good. Good. Please remember that I began this debate with ‘what if’. No, John, I am not here to offer you a job with my covert group, though I’ve no doubt you’d all do well there. No, there is a larger problem that we think you can address.”

“This is getting old, Starkings,” Jen said. “It hasn’t been the best week, and we’re not all in the best moods. Let’s get to the point.”

Starkings sipped at his coffee and said, “First, I must ask one thing of you all.”

“Go for it,” John said.

“Call me Richard.”

* * *

“Richard, then,” John said. “What do you want from us?”

“Your capture of Dr. Jackal, one mister Lewis Ellison, was a very noble way to use your powers. Unfortunately, it’s caused a bit of a conundrum. The whole world now knows about you. What’s more, others in the country who may have thought they were isolated cases now know there are others like them.”

“This is bad, why?” Kevin asked.

Starkings turned to face him. “We are not inclined to believe that every young person in the country who can perform these types of feats will use them in such a positive manner as you four have.”

“In other words,” John said, “You’re worried that people are going to start robbing banks or whatever.”

Starkings nodded. “Robbing banks. Performing terrorist attacks. Assassinating the President...”

“You really think this is a threat?” Brian asked him.

“We believe it will be, yes. The government has worked hard to keep these things under wraps, but we knew the silence couldn’t last forever. Now it’s broken, and it’s time to move on.”

“What do you want from us?” Jen asked him. Her voice was hoarse, but sounded strong and in control.

“We want to make you official,” said Starkings. “You’re young, you’re a good-looking bunch of kids, you’ve come tremendously far on your own, and hell... you’re already out in the public eye.”

“I’m not interested in being a government mouthpiece,” said John. “Public relations isn’t my strong point.”

“We can provide you with public relations support. What we need is a group who’s going to do good things, on the government dime.”

“Good things...” Jen’s voice was less than enthusiastic.

“Listen, Starkings... Richard... this is the first time we’ve tried to do a good thing and, well, it didn’t go real well,” John said. “We’re going to need time to think about this, and to talk it over.”

Starkings nodded. “I can give you a few days. Jennifer, the police won’t trouble you, but you have a father and a brother who would very much appreciate a phone call.”

Jen shivered, but didn’t answer him. Starkings continued.

“Kevin, I will keep the state from insisting you be reassigned to a foster home. We will also help you... arrange for your sister.”

“Thank you,” Kevin said, his voice little more than a whisper.

“And what’s the wizard got in his bag for me?” Brian asked. “Some courage? Maybe a brain?”

“How about I keep the media off all of your asses?”

“It’s a fucking deal,” Brian said.

Starkings looked at John, who said. “You have nothing I want.”

He nodded. “You’re right, mister Storm, I don’t. You are as well-adapted as anyone I’ve ever met, at your age and with your abilities.”

John shrugged. “Took me a while. Meeting Jen and finding out what she could do changed my outlook a lot.”

“I imagine. When will I hear from you, John? I’ll leave my card. Call any time.”

“What day is today?” John asked. “Wednesday?”

“That’s correct.”

“I’ll call you by Friday evening.”

Starkings stood. “Thank you for the coffee. You’re a good group of people and I hope you’ll consider my offer.”

Jen slid sideways so John could stand up. He shook Starkings’ hand and escorted him to the door. When it was closed, John leaned against it, closed his eyes, and let out a long breath of air. Eventually he looked around at his friends.

“Life is about to get really bizarre,” he said.

* * *

“Jen, are you okay?” Kevin asked. No one had moved since Starkings had left. No one had spoken. Jen was staring out the window, her eyes distant and trickling tears even though she was no longer sobbing.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Kev,” she replied, not looking at him.

“No,” he said, “but I think I will, just the same.”

Jen looked over at him, met his eyes, and after a moment gave him a tired grin. “I’m okay, Kevin. Really. Why the sudden concern?”

“You’ve... helped me a lot.” Kevin couldn’t seem to meet her eyes. “I’m sorry about shocking John. I’m sorry about everything.”

“You’re forgiven,” Jen said.

“Do you mean that?”

Jen nodded, then stood up and moved past him, touching him on the shoulder as she went. She crossed the room to John, who was still standing against the door, and put her arms around him, leaning against his chest. John hugged her tightly for a minute, then relaxed his grip.

“What now?” Jen asked him.

“Government super-heroes? Back to work at the electronics shop? Something else? Fucked if I know, Jen.”

“You’re the leader, John. Figure it out.”

“Why does everyone keep insisting on calling me the leader?”

“Because you’re the leader,” Brian said. Kevin made a noise of affirmation.

John rolled his eyes. “Fine, fuck it, I’m the leader. That’s great. I’m not telling you what to do with your lives. It hasn’t worked real well so far, in case none of you have noticed.”

“Yeah,” said Brian, his voice laced with sarcasm. “Our lives have really gone downhill since we were living in the subway, with Jen drinking herself to death and me having to hide from people whenever I spontaneously turned into a wolf.”

John was silent. He felt Jen laugh once against his chest.

“My life isn’t any worse than it was before. At least I’m not still working for that freak and believing his lies,” Kevin said.

“Our lives can’t ever be normal again, no matter what we choose,” said Brian. “The world knows about us now.”

“I don’t want to make a decision yet,” John said. “Not today. Hell, I have to work in two hours. I need breakfast. And a shower. And a cigarette.”

“Then let’s take some time. We can get together tonight and talk about it a little, okay?” Jen asked.

“Okay. Tonight, then.”

* * *

“I have to go,” Kevin said, and John turned to look at him.

“Go where?”

“April and I had... well, it wasn’t a home, but we had a place. We had that abandoned building, and she had things there. I did too. I want to get them.”

“Do you want company, Kev?” Jen asked.

“No,” he said. “You’ve all seen me cry enough, I think.”

He started to move across the room, and Jen reached out, touched his shoulder, and stopped him. Kevin glanced at her.

“You’re not going to do anything... rash, are you Kevin?”

He looked away for a minute, sighed, and shook his head. “No, I thought about it last night. If I was going to do it, I’d have done it then. I’d have taken that whole bottle of sleeping pills instead of taking two, and been done with it. I’ll be okay, Jen.”

“The media may still be outside,” Brian said. “Starkings may be able to clear them out, but I doubt he can do it this quick.”

“I can get away from the media,” Kevin said. “A camera crew can’t move very quickly through subways.”

Brian nodded. Jen let go of Kevin’s shoulder and said “Be careful, Kev. Come back soon.”

“I will,” Kevin said. He moved toward the door, and John stepped out of the way. Kevin opened it, and then looked back at them. “You... I need to thank you. I should’ve already thanked all of you, but it hurts so much. She’s gone.”

“Go get your sister’s stuff, Kevin,” John said. “We’ll be here when you’re back. Here, take a hundred bucks, buy some new clothes too.”

Kevin took the money and looked at all of them again for a moment. He swallowed hard, nodded, turned, and left.

“Anyone want breakfast?” Brian asked when he was gone. “I’ll brave the crowds for some muffins, but only if I’ve got permission to punch the next person who shouts ‘hey, Teen Wolf!’ at me.”

“Permission granted,” John said. “Here’s twenty bucks. I like blueberry.”

“Lemon-poppy-seed,” Jen said.

Brian nodded, took the cash, and left the apartment. John glanced at his watch. It was nearly eleven thirty. The coffee shop would be in full swing.

“He’ll be gone at least thirty minutes. You want to take a shower, or maybe at least change your shirt?” John asked.

Jen glanced at the blood stain on her shirt and laughed. “Yeh, I’ll take a shower. Come here first, though.”

John crossed the room and stopped before her, head tilted as if to ask what she wanted. Jen wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on tip-toe, and kissed him, long and slow. John put his hands around her waist and Jen pressed against him.

Eventually they broke apart and Jen looked at him and smiled. “I love you,” she said. “You’re doing a good job. Stop beating yourself up. We’re all alive. Jackal’s in jail. You’re doing the right thing.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks, Jen. I love you too.”

Jen smiled and pressed her lips against his neck for a minute. John hugged her.

“You okay about last night?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m... there will be times when I’m uncomfortable, John. For a long time. Maybe forever. What happened to me will always be a part of me. Do you understand that?”

John nodded. He’d fallen in love with the girl she was, not the girl she might have been without her uncle’s interference. “That’s fine, Jen, long as you promise to tell me what you’re feeling so we can work through it.”

“It’s a deal,” Jen said. She glanced over at the bathroom. John grinned and let her go.

“Take a shower,” he said. “I’m going to make another pot of coffee.”

* * *

“We have to make a decision,” John said.

They were gathered around the coffee table, which was piled high with cartons of takeout Italian food. John had finished his shift at work and arrived just before the delivery boy. Kevin had shown up only moments ahead of him, his eyes still red, but looking composed. Brian and Jen had spent the day cleaning John’s apartment. “Least we could do, given all the time we’ve spent here,” Brian had told him.

Now Jen, between bites of ravioli, said, “What are the options?”

“Working for the government is the most cut-and-dried of the bunch. We tell them ‘yes’ and do what they say. End of story. I’ve been thinking of a list of the others in my head, all day.”

Brian grabbed a pen from the drawer in the end-table, and a pad of paper. "I'll take notes," he said.

Kevin laughed. "What the fuck?" he asked. "It's just a conversation. Do you take notes when talking about basketball, too?"

"I don't like basketball. Anyway, the way I see it," Brian said, "this is a business meeting."

"Good point," Jen said. "Now pass the garlic bread."

"An informal business meeting," Brian muttered, handing the foil container to her. He wrote 'Option 1 -- Work for Government' on the paper, and said, "We'll worry about figuring out pros and cons in a minute. Give me the list, John."

John reached over, snagged one of Jen's ravioli with his fork, and grinned at her look of vague and mostly false agitation. He said, "Option two: we stick with the superhero gig, but we do it on our own terms, and charge people for our services."

"Oh, that's good," Jen said. "I've always wanted to know what filing for bankruptcy was like."

"Pros and cons *later*," John said, rolling his eyes. "I'm just listing the options."

"Next?" asked Brian.

"What the fuck is that?" Kevin questioned, indicating toward John's dish with his fork.

"Chicken marsala. It's chicken with mushrooms and wine and stuff." John said.

"Can I try it?"

"Next," Brian said.

“Yeh, sure, hang on.” John cut off a piece of chicken and moved it to Kevin’s plate. “But I want one of your meatballs.”

“Fair enough.”

“Next!” Brian cried. “I demand the next option, or none of you shall have the fucking cannolis that I put in the fridge!”

John held up his hands, laughing. “Okay! Christ, far be it from me to sacrifice my cannoli. Option three: we get day jobs, live our lives, never use our powers and let the media forget about us.”

“Never happen,” said Kevin through a mouth full of food. “We try to do that, and they’ll bug the shit out of us until we use them.”

“THESE ARE THE OPTIONS!” John bellowed. Jen laughed.

“We need a good bottle of red wine with this,” Brian commented.

“You’re too young, Kevin’s too young, and I don’t drink anymore,” Jen said.

Brian considered this and nodded. “Okay. Next, John?”

“Last one. We say ‘nice knowing you’ and go our separate ways.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Jen.

“No, I didn’t expect you would,” John replied. “But there’s nothing holding Brian and Kevin here.”

“I thought we weren’t discussing things yet, just listing...” Kevin said. Brian laughed, and looked down at the list.

“Can we cross out option four?” he asked after a moment.

“Yes,” said Kevin and Jen, speaking simultaneously. They grinned at each other.

“You’re stuck with us, Mister Storm,” Brian said, drawing a pen stroke through it. “We’re not going our separate ways.”

“Option three’s never going to happen,” said Jen. “Kevin’s right. We’ll have cameras in our face every day, forever. I’m sort of worried they might bug one of us enough that we end up doing something really, really stupid.”

John nodded. “I’d thought about that, and it concerns me, too. That’s also a problem with option two, although not as significant. We can control that.”

Brian bit his lower lip, looking at the paper. “Option two doesn’t work, really, because we’re not equipped to run a superhero business out of your apartment, John. I think it’d end up falling apart. We don’t have the structure in place to support it, long-term.”

There was quiet for a minute, as all four glanced at each other. Finally John broke the silence.

“Guess we’re done with that, then.”

* * *

Jen made coffee, and they sat in John’s apartment watching television, drinking and eating cannolis and not talking. There wasn’t much to be said, at least not yet. Everyone needed time to contemplate.

At nine, Brian turned to Kevin and said “Tired?”

He nodded. “Beat.”

“Want to split a hotel room?”

“I don’t have any cash...”

“Fuck it. I’ll pay.”

“You don’t have to do that, Brian,” Jen said. She was leaning against John, sitting on the floor, his arms wrapped around her. “Kevin can stay here if he needs to.”

Brian glanced at her, then at John, and then gave her a gentle smile. “I figure you could use a night alone” he said. Jen blushed slightly and looked away.

“Let’s finish up, then,” John said.

“What’s left?” Brian asked.

John shrugged. “Beats me. I have work tomorrow. I’m off Friday. I’ll call him then, and tell him. After that? Your guess is as good as mine, Bri. Maybe better.”

“I’ve got work tomorrow too, and then I’m going to go try to talk to Suzie. Probably stupid but... hey, no one said I was smart. Well, except Starkings, but what the fuck does he know? Why don’t we worry about this shit on Friday?” Brian asked.

John shrugged. “Just wanted to make sure everyone’s okay with this.”

“We’re all fine, John,” said Jen.

“Let’s get outta here, Kev,” Brian said. “There’s a special down the street. Two beds, free HBO, and a free breakfast with omelets and shit. Fifty bucks. My treat. You’ve had a bad week.”

“Let’s do it,” Kevin said.

They stood to go, and both John and Jen followed them to the door. Once there, Jen turned suddenly and hugged them both. “We’re doing the right thing,” she said. “I know it.”

Brian grinned. “I’ll see you guys on Friday,” he said.

“What about you, Kev?” Jen asked. “You got anything going tomorrow?”

“Nah,” he said.

“Come over. I hate it when John’s working. Soap operas are fucking boring.”

“Okay. Night guys,” Kevin said, and headed into the hall. Brian followed, waving over his shoulder.

John shut the door, turned to say something, and found himself muted by Jen’s lips, pressing against his. He kissed back, first holding her head in his

hands, then putting his hands on her hips. It was several minutes before she would let him pull away. At last she leaned back and grinned at him.

“You make me happy,” she said.

John smiled, and touched her cheek, and said, “I’m glad. You haven’t been happy enough in your life.”

Jen touched his arm, where she could feel underneath his t-shirt the crisscrossing pattern of scars. “Neither have you,” she said.

“I’ve been happy enough since I met you.”

Jen blushed again and looked away from him. John turned her face back and looked into her eyes. Jen opened her mouth, then closed it. At the back of John’s mind, voices whispered. Always there, never silent, but now he understood them. Now he could use them.

“I can hear you in my head, Jen, if I want to. I can hear what your voices are saying.”

“What are they saying?” Jen asked.

John smiled, and kissed her, and said, “They’re telling me that you love me like I love you.”

“That’s true,” Jen said. She pressed her lips to his neck.

“... and they’re telling me I should take you to bed.”

Jen laughed against his skin.

“That’s also true.”

* * *

Part 9 -- Epilogue

Jen

“Hello?” The voice at the other end of the line was gruff, and weary, and intimately familiar to Jen. She took a shuddery breath and for a moment could not force herself to speak. The words seemed caught in her throat. John squeezed her hand.

“Hello? Anyone there?” the voice asked. Jen shut her eyes and forced herself to speak.

“Daddy?” she asked in a tiny, little girl’s voice. It was all she could manage, for the moment.

The pause was interminable. When next her father spoke, Jen could hear the tension in his voice. She wondered if he was shaking as hard as she was.

“Jennifer? Sweetheart, is that you?”

“It’s me, Daddy,” Jen said. “I... I wanted to call you, and Timmy. I wanted to explain.”

She heard a coughing noise on the other end of the line, and it took her a moment to realize her father was crying.

“I saw you on the news but I didn’t believe it,” he said finally, his voice broken and weak. “I thought you were gone forever. Come home, baby. Please come home. We miss you so much.”

Jen lost her own grip on her emotions, felt hot tears flood her eyes, and welcomed them. Anything was better than the terror that she had felt, holding the handset to her ear, listening to the ring and wondering who would pick up, and what they would say. Wondering how she would be judged.

“I will, Daddy. Soon. I promise. I have to do some things first. I just... I needed to talk with you. About Jake. And about what happened.”

“We know what happened,” her father said. “Sweetie, I had no idea. If I knew, I... he was my brother, but I’d have... I’d have...”

“Daddy, stop. It’s over. It happened, it’s over, and it can’t be changed. My... I’ve met someone I love, Daddy, and he’s helping me. He helps me every day. His name is John. He talked me into calling you.”

“Then thank God for him.” said her father. “Bring him with you... bring his whole family. I don’t care, Jen, just come home.”

“Soon, Daddy. We... we’ve taken a job, and we have to get set up there, first. It’s complicated. I’m going to be on the news a lot, from now on, I think.”

“When will we see you, Jen?”

She glanced at John and said, “When?”

“Two weeks,” said John. He wiped the tears from her cheeks, but they were replaced immediately with fresh tracks. “Tell him he’s got my word.”

“John says two weeks, Daddy. He promises.”

Her father drew in a shaky breath and seemed to regain some level of control. “Okay. I... Jen, do you want to talk about all of this over the phone?”

“No,” she said. “Not really. It can wait, if you can.”

“I can. Two weeks, Jen. Promise?”

“Yes, Daddy. I promise.”

“Do you... did you want to talk to Tim?”

Jen sniffled. John handed her a tissue. “Is he there?”

“No, but I can have him call you. He came back from college and I’m letting him stay rent-free for a while to pay off his loans. But he’s out tonight.”

“I’d love to talk to him... but I’ll call him, okay? We’re not supposed to give out our number right now. All right?”

“Okay.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart...”

“I love you, and I miss you, and I’m sorry.”

There was another long pause, and then her father drew in a series of harsh breaths. At last, he could talk again. “I love you too, sweetheart. You have nothing to be sorry for. I’ll... I love you.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Yes, Jen. Call anytime. Anytime.”

“I will. Goodbye, Daddy.”

“Goodbye baby.”

There was a noise as he set the phone in the cradle, and Jen sobbed once, putting a hand to her forehead. John said, “You okay?” and she nodded.

“He’s... God, John, what was I thinking? So much time...”

“You’ll make up for it,” John said. His voice was soft and soothing and Jen leaned her head back against him for a moment. “We’ll go see him in a few weeks. If you want me to come, that is.”

Jen laughed and turned and hugged him.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

* * *

Brian

“Susannah? It’s me... don’t hang up...”

There was no answer on the other end of the line, but Brian could hear breathing. He charged ahead.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry. I should have told you, right from the start, but I was scared. I didn’t know what I was. I still really don’t, but I’ve been in touch

with some people recently who are helping to teach me. I'm not... dangerous... but I'm sorry. I don't blame you for hating me."

Brian stopped, aware that he was rambling, and waited.

Susannah's voice, when it came, was quiet but full of emotion. "I don't hate you Brian."

"No?" Brian tried not to let his relief enter his voice, but doubted he was successful.

"No. I just... I'm so angry at you. When I saw you on TV it was like somebody slapped me. I felt like you'd been lying to me, and I felt like I didn't really know who you were."

"Suzie, I thought I was being as honest with you as I could be. I've always told you *who* I am, I just... didn't tell you *what* I am."

"What you are scares me," Susannah said, her voice little more than a whisper.

"It scares me sometimes, too, Suzie. I just want you to know that I'm the same person on the inside, no matter what I look like on the outside."

There was silence on the other end of the line, and Brian felt his heart sink. Finally he said, "Thank you for letting me apologize, Suzie. I... I'll let you go now."

"Did you mean it?" Susannah said.

Brian was caught by surprise. "What?"

"We were in bed together that night and you said you were ready to sleep with me. You said you loved me. Did you mean it?"

"Yes. Jesus, Suzie, yes I meant it. Waking up with you the next morning was the best I've ever felt in my entire life."

"You're not lying?"

"Susannah, I've never lied to you. I kept things from you, is all. That was a mistake, and I'm sorry for it, but I never lied to you. I never will."

“Then tell me the truth about how you feel.”

“The truth? I love you, Suzie. I’ve barely been able to think about anything else since you... since we had our fight.”

“You don’t hate me for the things I said?” Now there was fear in her voice.

They had hurt him, those things, but Brian was ready to let them go. He said again, “I love you Suzie.”

Susannah took a deep, hitching breath and said, “Brian I’m so sorry. I love you too. Come see me, baby. I’ll call in to work. I just... I miss you so much. Come home.”

Brian shut his eyes and smiled. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

* * *

Kevin

“I fucked it up, Kiddo.”

Kevin was sitting on the grass next to the newly-turned earth that marked his sister’s grave. He was done crying for the day, and now all that was left was an emptiness inside that seemed impossible to fill. April was gone. She was his only relative, his only blood connection, and she was gone. She would never be coming back.

“I told you when we left the house that I’d always take care of you. That things would go okay. That we’d figure something out. I told you that, but I lied. I fucked up, and I’m sorry April. I’m so sorry.”

The mound of earth with its simple gravestone made no response. Kevin put his head in his hands.

“I want to do something good, April. Do you understand that? I have a chance to do something good. I can’t bring you back, and I can’t ever make up for letting you die, but... I can try to do good. Would you have wanted that, April?”

Yes, his mind told him. April would have wanted that very much.

“I’m going to do my best, Kiddo. There are people out there who need to be stopped. Jackal was one of them and even though I had to stop pretending you were all right, I’m glad that we stopped him.”

April said she was glad, too.

Kevin leaned back on his hands and looked up at the sky, then across the grounds of the cemetery. In the distance, an old woman knelt at one stone, and a child toddled around another while her mother stood, head down, shoulders shaking. Kevin thought of the people they hadn’t been able to save. Not just his sister, but those who had become part of Jackal’s hideous sculpture, and god knew how many others before he had begun that project.

The families of those people would be involved in the prosecution of Dr. Jackal. Kevin hoped he would not have to be a part of that circus. He hoped, in fact, in his secret heart, that Jackal would be shivved in prison before he ever had a chance to stand trial. Jen had prevented him from murdering Jackal, and Kevin was glad for that, but it didn’t change his belief that the man deserved to die.

Should Jackal manage somehow to escape conviction, through some insane travesty of justice, Kevin would hunt him down and destroy him.

But for now, for today and tomorrow and the next, he was a good guy, on the side of people whom he liked, and who seemed to like him. Starkings would provide for them, and help them, and maybe he was a good guy like them. Maybe not. Kevin had little doubt that John, and Jen, and Brian would come to the right conclusions.

“I’ll take the chance,” he said to April’s grave. “I’ll try to trust them.”

April was quiet, but it seemed to Kevin that there was no disapproval. This was his choice to make, and having never met these people, she had no real input for him.

“I’m crazy,” Kevin said, rolling his eyes.

April told him he wasn’t crazy.

“I’m talking to my dead sister.”

April told him that the women up the hill were talking to their dead relatives, too. She told him that this is how human beings deal with death.

She told him she missed him, and she loved him, and she would be here for him if he needed her.

Kevin had thought his tears exhausted, but had been wrong. He put his face in his hands and wept.

* * *

John

“Shut up and listen to me.”

John wasn't angry, but he didn't have a lot of time, and what little patience he might once have possessed had long since worn out.

“We're moving our stuff tomorrow. No, I said listen... We're moving our stuff tomorrow, and there needs to be a place to put it. I don't care if your employee wasn't authorized to rent us the place at that price. She did, we signed, end of story. Either you clear out a two bedroom with hardwoods and a fireplace by tomorrow, or you can start talking with US Government lawyers. That's the situation. Now, is there going to be an apartment for us tomorrow, or what?”

Jen, barely visible to his left, standing at the window and smoking a cigarette, threw him a smirking glance. John rolled his eyes, and shook his head, listening to the flustered building manager on the phone and wondering why nothing was ever easy.

“I have the contract right here. It's right in front of me. The price is on it. My signature's on it. Your employee's signature is on it. The witness signature is on it. It's a one-year lease. You want to jack the rate after that, be my guest.”

More blustering from the phone. John felt the first stirrings of real anger within him.

“Okay, you know what? That's cool. My lawyer's name is a Mister Jefferson Haysworth. Yeah, that's right, the one who was in the paper last week because of the UN case. No, I'm not kidding. What does it say in my file as my occupation? That's right. Government Peacekeeper. So anyway, Mister Haysworth will be

contacting you tomorrow, since I'm going to have to sue you for breach of con-- oh, you *do* have an apartment?"

Jen snorted laughter, waved dismissively as if washing her hands of the entire thing, pitched her cigarette out the window and headed toward the refrigerator. A moment later, John felt cold against his hand and took the can of soda she'd brought him, mouthing "thanks."

The man on the phone was talking a mile a minute now, explaining that it had been a mistake, that he'd thought they were a different prospective tenant, that he was sure everything would be in order by tomorrow. John cut him off.

"That's terrific. Just make it happen. We'll be there at ten in the morning with a moving truck."

Not that there was much to move. John owned little furniture and few knickknacks. Still, the government was paying for the whole deal, so John wasn't complaining. All he had to do was kick back and watch people box up his possessions, load them into a truck, haul them across town, unload them, and unpack them. He was already beginning to enjoy this civil servant life.

The building manager on the other end of the phone made some final polite remarks -- his voice still smoldering -- and John said, "Thanks. We'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye."

"Jesus," said Jen as he hung up.

"If there's roach one in that apartment, I'm demanding the security deposit back. Three fucking grand a month and he's got the nerve to tell me that we're being undercharged. Please."

Jen rubbed his shoulders and kissed the back of his neck. "It's done, John. Another battle won."

"There's still so much shit to do," John said, but she could feel him relaxing, and was glad for it.

"Starkings said he'd take care of it. Let him take care of it."

"I've spent too long taking care of things on my own, Jen."

“But now you’ve got a team, John,” Jen said, “and part of that team is Starkings. Don’t refuse his help.”

John sighed, and nodded, and turned around in her arms, putting his hands on her waist. “Okay, you’re right,” he said, and kissed her.

“You ready to start your new life?” She asked when they broke apart.

John shrugged, grinned, and said, “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

* * *

Starkings

“Yes, Jefferson, I understand that your time is valuable. No, I don’t think that being beholden to the whims of these ‘children’ is a waste of your time. As the person who pays your preposterous fees, I believe my input is all that should matter. No, Jefferson, I’m not interested in your image. You work for the United States Government. We pay you unbelievably well for your services, better even than you could do in the private sector, and if you keep it up you know we’ll eventually make you an ambassador.”

Starkings yawned, glanced at the clock, shuffled through the few papers on his desk. The light indicating his second phone line began blinking, and Starkings glanced at the caller-ID box and thought, *Ah, the lesser of two evils.*

“Jefferson, I must go. You can call me tomorrow if you’d like and we can continue this scintillating discussion whereupon you complain that your ego is being crushed, and I tell you to just do your job. Yes, in fact, I do think I’m funny, Jefferson. Goodbye now. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Starkings pressed the line-1 button, hanging up on Jefferson Haysworth, and pressed the line-2 button.

“Mister Storm,” he said.

“John.”

“John, then. What can I do for you today?”

“The guy from the gym said that he didn’t want to leave the code on our answering machine, so he left it with you?”

“Ah, that’s right.” Starkings glanced up at his computer monitor, opened a file, and read the code to John.

“Thanks,” John said. “So, we’re going over there to try the place out. We’re not scheduled for anything until that press conference next Monday, right?”

“That’s correct, John. You’ve met Sarah, right?”

“Sarah... the PR Woman?”

The term was, in fact, *handler*, which Starkings found particularly amusing in light of the dangerous nature of John’s group. He felt John might bristle at the term, so he said only, “Yes, Sarah Tanner, from PR. She will be working with you next week to get you prepared for the conference. It’s going to be... you can expect it to be rather large, John.”

“Great,” John said, in a tone that indicated otherwise.

“John, this is necessary. The public needs to know who you are, right from the get-go. If we try to keep this quiet, the conspiracy theorists will be all over us within weeks, shrieking about how we’re building an army of supermen in order to conquer the earth, or something equally moronic.”

John laughed. “Okay, Richard. We’ll work with Sarah. Will we be able to talk more with you?”

“Certainly. I’m going away for the weekend... taking a trip up to our lake house with the family, but I will see you next week.”

“Sounds good,” said John. “Talk to you then.”

He hung up the phone, and Richard set his own in the cradle, a serene smile on his face. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers folded in front of him. This was good. This was very good.

A telepath, a generative biomorph, a woman with tremendous control of kinetic energy, and a young man with power over electricity. All working together,

and all working for him. Such power at his beck and call, and already so much trust.

The question now was simply how to use such power.

Starkings' smile widened to a grin.

* * *

Team

“This... is... UNBELIEVABLE!”

Brian, in his hirsute form, leapt from the twenty-five foot diving board and performed a series of back flips before crashing awkwardly into the water, producing a tremendous splash. Jen and Kevin were shrieking with laughter as he surfaced.

“Nice, Brian,” John said. “Ten points for the dive, but your entry needs a little work.”

“Ya think?” questioned Brian, pulling himself out of the pool and bouncing on one leg to clear his ear of water. His shorts, comically baggy when he was in his human form, now looked equally ridiculous stretched tight around his muscular, furry legs.

“Dude,” Kevin managed between gasps, “it looked like someone dropped a BUICK into the pool!”

The gym was more by far than they had expected. Contained within a large, unassuming warehouse in Brooklyn, the gym featured a raised track for running, below which one could find a plethora of weights and exercise machines. In the center was a full-sized basketball court. Kevin and John had already broken it in with a game of one-on-one.

Adjacent to all of this, sealed off by a glass wall, was the pool, an Olympic-sized monstrosity with three diving boards at staggered heights, a hot tub, and a sauna. Seeing this, Jen had announced her intention to simply move into the gym itself and live there.

In all, it amounted to a state-of-the-art, private health club that the team had 24-hour access to. They had already decided that workouts would be a daily event for the entire group.

Jen, looking unbelievably gorgeous to John's eyes in a two-piece bathing suit the color of her eyes, climbed to the five-foot dive board and executed a much more graceful dive into the water. She surfaced, paddled to the side of the pool, and looked up at him.

"Coming in?" she asked.

"No, I think I'll pass for the moment. I want to do some more exploring," John said. He turned and headed for the glass door at the end of the room.

"Your loss, man," Kevin said, and John heard a splash as he dove.

In a small closet, John found a variety of equipment. Soccer balls, tennis racquets -- there were courts, it turned out, through a small door on the opposite side of the building from the pool -- and more. He imagined that anything he might want could easily be acquired for him by his new employers.

Eventually John ended up walking the track in slow circles, thinking. He heard noise down below and stopped, leaning against the railing. Below him, Jen and Kevin had taken to the basketball court, while Brian worked out with weights and shouted derisive comments toward them. John watched them, grinning.

Those are my friends, he thought. The first real friends I've ever had. Not only that, but the first woman I've ever loved is down there, too.

As if hearing this, Jen glanced up and flashed John a brilliant smile before looking back at Kevin, defending against his advance toward the basket. John watched her, now wearing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, and thought about what the future might bring. He wasn't sure. This was an adventure, and he had no idea what surprises lay in store for them along the way, nor what final destination they might arrive at. He knew only that they had turned some corner in their lives and embarked upon something new.

He looked down at them with that same smile on his face, feeling happy and proud and excited at what they had already accomplished, and what they might someday do.

My love. My life. My friends, he thought. And then:

My team.

* * *

The End